

# **Motherhood Constructed Online: An exploratory study of South African mommy bloggers**

by  
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## **Declaration**

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## **Abstract**

When blogging first entered the collective mainstream as part of social media, it was thought there was a clear distinction between online and offline life, that communities needed to have physical form, and that ‘mommy bloggers’ wrote vapid posts about their children. And while those perceptions have changed, there are still elements of those notions that continue to exist. This thesis explores those ideas, and shows a piece of the overall picture that makes up the South African ‘mommy’ blogosphere. This piece of the picture was created using an online focus group, interviews and a thematic analysis of the blogs of thirteen participants. What has emerged is that blogging is a lot of work, which often goes unrecognised. For the popular blogger, it provides social, cultural and material gain. The research also shows that the blog is the electronic body that the blogger uses in the blogosphere, and that the notion of an online and offline space does not hold true.

## Opsomming

Wanneer blogging as deel van sosiale media die eerste keer in die kollektiewe hoofstroom ingeskryf is, is daar gedink dat daar 'n duidelike onderskeid sal wees tussen aanlyn en aflyn lewe, dat daardie gemeenskappe moes fisiese vorm hê – en dat mamma-bloggers vapede plasings oor hul kinders geskryf het. En terwyl daardie persepsies meestal verander het, is daar nog elemente van hierdie gedagtes wat bestaan. Hierdie proefskrif verken daardie gedagtes en wys 'n stuk van die algehele prentjie wat die Suid-Afrikaanse mamma-blogosfeer uitmaak. 'n Gedeelte van die prentjie is geskep met die hulp van 'n aanlyn fokusgroep, onderhoude en 'n tematiese eksplorاسie van die blogs van dertien deelnemers. Wat na te vore gekom het, is 'n blik op hoe blogging baie werk is, 'n feit wat dikwels ongewaardeërd is. Blogging bied ook sosiale, kulturele en materiële wins vir die gewilde blogger. Die navorsing wys ook dat die blog die elektroniese liggaam is wat die blogger in die blogosfeer gebruik, en dat die idee van 'n aanlyn- en aflynruimte nie waar is nie.

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# *1. Introduction*

“But while this blog is, in many ways, about her, it’s really about me. It’s about my journey, it’s about my ideas about pregnancy, parenting, motherhood, marriage and whatever else. I love sharing what I’m thinking, mainly because I love seeing what you all respond with. Sometimes my ideas resonate with you, and sometimes they don’t, and it’s just so intriguing to have you with me on this journey” (Participant 6).

We are all driven to find those like us, to not feel alone on our journey ... it is, one could say, the hallmark of being socialised. This thesis explores one such instance of reaching out. Within this work, that instance is that of a blogging community, in particular the South African ‘mommy blogging’ community.

This research is driven by an interest that in part comes from personal experience. During pregnancy, my stay-at-home, work-at-home mother stages, and especially now (the mother-wife-student-employee-figuring life out stage), it was my friends in my computer/phone who played a large part in keeping me going. They were/are the people I could turn to with questions on anything parenting (and often, not-parenting) related. There is something about digital communities that draws people together. This work is an attempt to find out what that is, and in this case, how it relates to motherhood.

Additionally, it speaks to the other part driving my interest in the topic – understanding what the South African mommy blogging space is, how it works, how motherhood is constructed, and how for some bloggers, the space changes from one of sharing to one that is used to share **and** gain materially.

## **Research questions**

Given the interests which drive this research, the questions related to it are the following:

- What type of space is the South African mommy blog?
- How is motherhood constructed in that space?
- Where does authenticity feature in the mommy blogging space?
- What are the unwritten rules that need to be followed for that space to be successful for the blogger?

## Chapter overview

In Chapter 2, 'Researching the Digital', the focus is on locating the work in digital sociology. Time is spent on discussing the manner in which qualitative research techniques are adapted to work with digital tools. Part of the discussion focuses on aspects of reflexivity and how that was used as a continuous consideration in the process of data gathering, and in working through the analysis of the work. The balancing act of what is known to me in my various roles of researcher, member of the community and friend to some of the participants, is also discussed.

Chapter 3, 'Blogs – the Electronic Body', takes a more detailed look at the form of blogs, and attempts to define that. The chapter looks at why the participants blog and share, and concludes with a discussion of the blog as a genre of writing, what that means and how it plays out. The chapter also discusses the blogosphere as a community, the ways in which we can observe Miller *et al*'s scalable sociality and Bourdieu's social and cultural capital at work. It includes definitions of the aforementioned, as well as the way in which Miller and Bourdieu's work speak to each other and this work.

In Chapter 4, 'She Works Hard for Her Money: An Exploration of the Different Ways in Which Bloggers Work', we explore the participants' view that blogging – and all that is tied to it – is work. It establishes what motherhood is for the participants, and just how notions of motherhood turn mothering into work. This is followed by a look at parenting while blogging, briefly touching on how the participants manage it. The chapter also looks at other labour the participants do – labour/work which they discuss and use to connect with the community. This work more clearly shows the process whereby the participants establish their social and cultural capital and turn it into a means for material gain.

Chapter 5, the conclusion, will serve as the space to bring the answers to the research questions in a concise summary of the main points from each chapter. It also includes a brief discussion of the limitations of this study, and details items for possible further study.

## A note

There are sections in the work where I use certain phrases or terms unique to certain social media platforms. In those instances, there will be a footnote explaining the phrase/term. In explaining what those terms mean, I draw on definitions from Merriam-Webster online. Merriam-Webster is widely

regarded as one of the best<sup>1</sup> online dictionaries, largely inspired by their use of their Twitter account. It seems fitting to make use of them, given the way in which they are making use of their credential as a dictionary in building not only social capital for the brand, but cultural capital as well, as they are making use of distinction to be a tastemaker (bearing in mind that dictionaries themselves are items of cultural capital). Here their social reach and capital, are increased by every retweet or article that refers to something they tweeted, all of which adds to their influence and cultural capital: not only has the dictionary become the go-to one for definitions, but over time it gains even more influence and capital.

Given the digital nature of the manner in which the research was conducted, and the focus on blogs, there may be posts or sites mentioned within the work that have either been changed, hidden from public view or deleted. And although nothing is truly deleted from the internet, it may become a slightly more challenging task to access everything mentioned within this thesis. Something that was made a deliberate challenge to access, is the names of the participants and their blogs.

While care has been taken to protect the identities of my participants, it is something that has not been fully within my control. While participants might not use their full names on their blogs, they do on occasion use their full names on other social media platforms they use. These are easily accessed from their blogs – and their blogs from the other platforms – so it is quite possible to infer the identities of my participants, especially of those who do not use pseudonyms or assumed identities online, although it would take a fair amount of time. Within the work I will refer to them as Participant 1 – 13 when quoting from the focus group, their interviews or blog posts.

While it may, perhaps, be considered an unusual mix of meta bodies of humanistic (Miller and Bourdieu) and transhumanist (boyd<sup>2</sup>) theories; there are aspects from the meta thoughts that apply to different aspects of the work discussed, including, but not limited to the manner in which the body is constructed and viewed, and the ways in which we engage with social media. The ways in which those aspects apply and are good fits for the work, can be seen throughout – notably from Chapter 3 onwards. And while the overall style and tone of this work may strike some as slightly informal, the style and tone used here is reflective of the field explored within the study.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://fortune.com/2017/01/24/trump-merriam-webster-dictionary-meaning/> and [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.za/entry/merriam-webster-trump-counsel\\_us\\_5910804fe4b0e7021e9961d0](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.za/entry/merriam-webster-trump-counsel_us_5910804fe4b0e7021e9961d0)

<sup>2</sup> boyd, chooses to not capitalise her name and surname. See her post on why <https://www.danah.org/name.html>

## 2. *Researching the digital*

The trouble with digital work is that, within an instant, platforms no longer exist, and we are left with references and ways of making sense of things that are no more. This chapter will locate the various platforms at play in this work, and the ways they produced understanding for the participants and this work. Besides examining the methods used for this work, space is also given to examining the concepts and literature that frame the research.

### **Digital sociology**

In looking at digital sociology this work is heavily influenced by *Digital Sociology* by Marres (2017) and work by Miller *et al* (2016) on digital anthropology. Marres' book has had an impact in the way in which this work was conceptualised and framed, especially in terms of applying a sociological lens to it, while Miller's work has served as a guide to the methodological approach – supplemented by Salmon's *Doing Qualitative Research Online* (2016).

In considering what digital sociology is, it is useful to start with what it is not. “To equate digital social research with digital data analysis is to go along with an all too narrow conception of the relation of sociology and computing, one that does not equip us to investigate how sociality itself is undergoing transformation in digital societies” (Marres, 2017:3). The quote serves as a clear warning that considering digital sociology in line with digital analysis is not what makes up digital sociology; while digital analysis is useful it does not allow for a full consideration of the ‘why’ along with the ‘how’. Furthermore, Marres (2017:69) reminds us that “it is *never* just the platform, the data, the practice or the context, in and of itself, that makes digital sociality what it is. Sociality is not reducible to either one of these elements in isolation,” something which has tonal shades of Miller *et al*'s scalable sociality and Miller's work on polymedia.

It is an important consideration, and serves as a reminder that while this work is focused on the bloggers and the act of blogging, that they are not blogging in isolation and are often found across multiple social media platforms – in fact, to be fully successful they need to be on multiple social media platforms, which are often dictated to them by trends and reader expectations. Another important factor is that “the digital’ touches on most aspects of social life. It is no longer special, and must be addressed as part of

most, if not all, substantive areas of sociology, from citizenship to intimacy, the relations between the state and the economy, the changing role of contractual labour in society, to the experience of self and nature, from gender relations to the city” (Orton-Johnson & Prio, 2013; Lupton, 2014 as cited in Marres, 2017:13). It is clear that digital sociology extends far beyond tidy social media constraints.

Thus, digital sociology is simultaneously both about and not about digital instruments/tools. “We arrive at a rather different understanding of ‘digital sociology’ when we take ‘digital’ to refer, not to the topics, but to the *instruments* of social enquiry, to the methods and techniques of sociological research” (Marres, 2017:28). It is both about and not about the various digital platforms that individuals make use of.

It is clear though, that is it about how “the digital touches on most dimensions of social life from the most intimate details (how we wake up) to the widest global systems (the undermining of ‘supply chain models’ by ubiquitous computing; shifts in migrant travel routes), [resulting in] it [taking] on the aspect of what we called...’a total social fact’” (Marres, 2017:25). It is clear that what makes digital sociology different to sociology not conducted digitally, lies not only in the space wherein it operates, but that it also focuses on the tools and instruments of the space and how it interacts with those who use it.

## Using traditional techniques in a non-traditional way

“The digital then presents social researchers with a basic methodological choice: in conducting digital research, do we seek to translate established methods like ethnography or content analysis into digital forms, or do we seek to develop more experimental, ‘new’ methods that seek to take advantage of the inherent features of digital technologies and practices?” (Marres, 2017:82)

This question posed by Marres (2017) in her book *Digital Sociology* encompasses the heart of the methodological choices made in order to best serve the work done here. At the heart of it, the object of this study is a group – or rather a community of women – looking at the manner in which each of them came to that community, the manner in which the digital technology made it possible, and the way those individuals use that digital technology as a means of influence to gain economically.

Or is it rather that the digital technology at use is the community, and not just the tool of the community, and that this technology itself is the site of influence and the items that create material gain? This is a question that needs to be addressed, as the way in which digital technology is used shapes the manner in which the group functions, and creates the influence that it holds.

This chapter will attempt to answer the questions posed by means of a discussion on the manner in which data was gathered for the purposes of this study.

## Research design

Given the nature of the questions that are key to the research, and that the work is exploratory in nature, it was clear that using a research design comprising qualitative methods would be the better fit in attempting to find answers. Additionally, as this work is looking at mommy bloggers, and blogging occurs online, it made further sense to use qualitative methods, digitally – with the blog being the form of the digital technology at the heart of the work, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. Thus, the decision was made to employ the use of an online focus group (conducted via WhatsApp<sup>3</sup>), semi-structured interviews (some conducted online via WhatsApp and e-mail, the rest telephonically), and a discourse analysis of the blogs of the participants.

The decision to make use of the available digital technologies in this instance is an example of adapting traditional forms of data analysis to the technology available. This has the additional bonus of making it easier to have access to the participants: almost half of the participants are in Johannesburg, South Africa, with the rest living in Cape Town, across the country.

The discourse analysis of the blogs was guided by the thematic analysis of the focus group and interviews. All methods were tempered by reflexivity, a “methodological self-consciousness” (Bryman, 2012: 394). In this study, the understanding and application of reflexivity comes from Pierre Bourdieu’s work. In particular, I draw upon the way in which Wacquant phrases it in the book they co-authored, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992).

Reflexivity “entails ... the systematic exploration of the ‘unthought categories of thought which delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought’ (Bourdieu, 1982a:10 as cited in Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:40), as well as guide the practical carrying out of social inquiry,” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:40) all of which needs to occur within the space of enquiry, and not the space of participation. This meant that throughout this research I had to ensure I reflected on the decisions made, their repercussions, and to consider always exactly what lay behind the way I thought things through, or rather, which space

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<sup>3</sup> WhatsApp is a web based instant messaging service for smartphones.

those considerations came from. Which of those roles I occupied underpinned what? How did my methods related to the research play a part in that which I found, or noticed?

This played out in a few ways, the first of which was the way things that came out of the focus group influenced the questions I asked during the interview process. In turn, the answers from earlier interviews influenced the types of questions I asked of participants interviewed at a later stage. And as the data from the focus group and interviews shaped the themes that clarified which blog posts to use for content analysis, the very process of examining how and why I understood or thought of things in a particular way would leave an undeniable print on the work as a whole.

Another more explicit way this process played out, was that I had to ensure I did not include knowledge that would fall outside the scope of the research. Because I was drawing on my existing network of relationships, there were instances where I was privy to the reasoning behind certain blog posts: the events, the people, and the mood that shaped it. However, those reasons and thoughts were not disclosed to me in my role of researcher, but as a close friend.

It has been a particularly tricky line to walk, especially during times of upheaval in the mommy blogosphere when long simmering tensions were coming to the fore. As some of the participants phrased it, “There were many times when it felt as if none of us had ever left high school – continuous tensions and cold fights, with snide comments becoming the norm.” Yet, fascinating as those aspects would be for this research, they could not form part of the work unless addressed head-on in the public-private social media spaces – in the form of tweets (not the subtweets<sup>4</sup> doing the rounds), blog posts and comments on those and other platforms.

It created the need for constant reflexivity: the known and unknown were always at play and to be referred to when doing work associated with the research. The information I was privy to as a friend was unavoidable – unless I removed myself from those friendships for the duration of my research. This would have left a distinct impression to some that I had just used them, their work, their situation and feelings for my own gain. As such, it was a constant tug between ensuring that the interesting ideas/details/thoughts I noted as interesting to explore further in my work weren’t grabbing my interest

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<sup>4</sup> “A subtweet is a standalone response to someone else’s tweet that does not mention the other person or their tweet at all.

The people who follow both the tweeter and the subtweeter will see the tweets and make the connection, but the original tweeter won’t be alerted to the comment. It’s a sly – or passive-aggressive, depending on your view – interaction that appears only on Twitter” (Merriam-Webster.com, 2017).



based on knowledge I had come across only because of my pre-established relationship with the participant. It became a constant tug of war between balancing different aspects of myself, and my identity. How to keep dimensions of myself separate from each other came more to the fore. That, in itself, speaks to the different ways we negotiate and perform different aspects of ourselves and our identities. Yet, this raises the question of whether we ever operating with one identity/sense of self?

I observed that the very thing that enabled ease of access to my participants became the thing that would hamper the work getting done. It added another dimension of difficulty to the work – the data gathering – and one that, unlike the lack of bodily cues and nuance that was countered through other means, there was no easy fix for. Schirato and Webb (2002:258) state that “reflective judgement is what enables us to make sense of the unknown, the unexpected, and from the application of this judgement, learn more about the world.” Here it allowed me to make the known more manageable and usable in a way that would not influence the unknown to be discovered.

In wanting to counter-balance the known that should not have been known, weight was given to the choice of three data collection methods. Not only would the use of three data collection methods help give a more solid, practical heft to the process of reflexivity, but it would also allow for triangulation. Employing three data collection methods meant that meeting the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and authenticity (Bryman, 2012: 390) was more likely to occur.

Although the need for triangulation is generally considered to be more in line with quantitative research, I felt it important to strive for that within this study given the general perceptions about mommy bloggers. In the South African blogging space, mommy bloggers are generally not taken seriously. The commonly held opinion is that they only talk about poop and nappies. It is a perception felt both by the participants (and at times by me), and one of the reasons the label of ‘mommy blogger’ does not sit well with some. Therefore it was important for me to do all that could be done to imbue a sense of seriousness to that which is clearly very important to the participants.

This chapter will discuss the methods used within this project following the order they are shown in the table below.

Method	Cape Town	Johannesburg
Focus group	7	
<b>Interview:</b>	7	6
E-mail	3	2
WhatsApp	1	0
Telephonic	3	4
<b>Blog Analysis</b>	7	6

*Table 1.* Number of participants per data gathering method.

## Blogs as social media

In their definitive article that set the tone for the definition of social media, boyd and Ellison (2007) describe social media – or rather:

“social networking sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate lists of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.”

From this and Miller *et al* (2016:x) stating that: “Social media should not be seen primarily as the platforms upon which people post, but rather as the contents that are posted on these platforms,” it is clear that the platforms and tools used in conducting this research fall under social media. This is something to take note of that WhatsApp, although perceived as a tool for private communication, falls under the heading of social media. The content, not the platform makes it social.

WhatsApp is semi-public within a bounded system – any user can add a user within their social network to a group. Thus, you have instances where people who do not know each other are added to a group by the person you have in common. That point of connection between the two (in this example) who do not know each other fits in with the second part of the definition given by boyd and Ellison. And then, within the group, they can then “view and traverse their list of connection and those made by others within the system” (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Rettberg (2008: 76 -77) quite aptly demonstrates the application of boyd and Ellison’s definition of social media as it applies to blogs by stating that:

“Blogs and social networking sites are *persistent* in that the information you enter is recorded and can be accessed later. ... Online spaces are *searchable*: people can find you. ... These spaces are *replicable*: photos and conversations can be copied and modified so there’s no way of telling them apart from the original. ... Finally, online spaces have *invisible audiences*. You don’t know exactly who is viewing your profile or reading your blog.”

This assists in including the other social media platforms that bloggers use as part of social media, with the exception of Snapchat. Snapchat was deliberately designed to not be persistent, at the very least on the platform itself – the photos and videos are unavailable for others to view unless deliberately saved and shared at a later point from the PIN-required storage space. Snapchat emphasises that what makes social media social is the content, especially given that the ‘snaps’ are shared semi-publicly and that they are conversational.

## **Researcher as the research instrument**

The process of constantly practicing reflexivity with this work made it important to consider the role I play as the research instrument. Is the researcher a truly neutral tool that just acts as the means for the data or information to be disseminated to those who are interested in the topic at hand? And if so, is that information or data to be left just as it is, in a raw, unprocessed state? Surely not: the data only becomes information that is easily understood and something to be worked with through a process of thinking it through and finding the most salient points. Is that process of taking it from something raw, which is just there, to something that can be worked with and used to help make sense of/understand a phenomenon, something that is shaped in only one form, or are there different levels to it?

The researcher is not an objective research instrument. Objectivity is strived for, but it cannot be guaranteed. We do not come to things without experiences or information written on our bodies. It is our

bodies that are the true conduits between the data/information and how we see/hear or understand it. But is the body of the researcher just something physical that occupies a space or is it shaped and constructed in various ways? How does that body operate/work within spaces that are not physical? And with the body of the researcher being the instrument, and when that instrument or body is thought of/used and shaped in a certain way, it means that the data or information that comes from that instrument/person has itself been shaped and understood in a certain way. Is it something that can be balanced out through certain actions? It is the role of a reflexive researcher to be aware of this and adapt, rework and remodel her process of performing research as a response to all that she comes across in the process of doing research.

In the section above when discussing reflexivity in terms of this work, I made mention of the various identities and the roles I had – that of researcher and friend – to which I need to add the role of member of the blogging community. The problem comes in that there is no way to clearly separate the three: within this work one will always influence the other, as all are part of who I am, which impacts on my writing, especially, as a friend and member of the blogging community.

The real work or challenge is to be aware of this, and to act with or against it as needed. It is a balancing act that is constantly part of the work, which became more apparent as the work progressed. When considering the potential participant pool, the fact that I had pre-established relationships with the potential participants, due to being a member of the blogging community, was not something that I had ever considered in a negative light. It was, and still is, my contention that it would be of great aid in pursuing this work. However, as the work progressed varying shades of grey emerged.

As mentioned before, the balance between the known and unknown has been a challenge. It has meant a constant remaking, reconsideration, and change in approach to the work. It has meant having to do an inordinate amount of work on considering all aspects of the research in an ethical manner. Knowing about certain events, tensions or reasons behind things, and those things having the potential of adding greatly to the work meant that ethical behaviour had to remain at the forefront, with reflexivity.

It would have been highly unethical to lead my participants down certain paths that I wished to explore. There were things that I could see no clear way to bring to the fore with the participants, and as such I had to abandon them as potential avenues for further exploration, which hampered the greater potential of this work. But there would be no sense in pushing my participants in particular directions simply to

gain what I wanted to gain. The potential of this work would truly be lost, as nothing that would come from it would be regarded in a good light due to unethical behaviour.

Yet, it also brought to the fore an examination of my role as friend. How ethical was it for me to still be as active in my friendships with the participants? Where and how was I to draw the line between myself as a researcher and as a friend? Or was this just something I was attempting to oversimplify? We are, after all, more than just the roles we occupy. But how those roles we occupy intertwine has implications on how we understand and act, thus making it important to consider where that leaves the researcher as an instrument of the researcher?

Oddly, those questions were not as applicable to my role as a member of the South African blogging community. There was no great push to clearly distinguish between the information I knew thanks to being part of the mommy blogging community and the information I held because of my role as researcher. It seems this can be related to the fact that it is this particular form of familiarity that led to this research interest. There is no way, and no need, to separate those two roles. It is an instance where those two forms of identity can be intertwined with no negative aspect coming from it.

Is it just a matter of making use of various identities in different situations? I am inclined to see that as a potential solution for this question. It would work in various ways, much as how we present different aspects of ourselves when we are with different groups of people. It comes from a consideration that your home self is not the same as your work self, who is not the same self as the one who engages with a group where all share a hobby. The various selves we show to others all then follow with the differing rules – or scripts – of social engagement in those spaces. It is in the way we practice our sociality: we know that different spaces require different behaviours, and even have different languages or registers. The rules for those spaces become inscribed on our bodies. They become part of our habitus.

## **Sampling process**

Finding participants is usually one of the challenges of doing qualitative research. While there were some participant related challenges, those challenges did not include finding them. Since I have been part of the broader South African blogging community, on-and-off since 2005 (with my current blog since 2009), and the mommy blogging community since 2014, getting into contact with potential participants was never going to be a problem.

In fact, I contend that being a somewhat known quantity to potential participants granted me greater access to the field site and potential participants. My established relationship with the participants gave them a level of assurance that they would be clearly listened to, even though, as discussed earlier in this chapter, being known to my participants came with its own particular set of challenges.

The established relationship I have with the participants varied across the group. At the barest minimum, I was known to the participant because I had read and commented on her blog and/or had a conversation with her on Twitter. On the other end of the spectrum were those where the relationship included time spent together, attending events together – including but not limited to blogger meet-ups – daily conversations, and all the other aspects that make up a good friendship.

The real challenge in terms of my participant pool became making sure the sampling process included a multiplicity of voices; thus leading to purposive sampling. As per the Sage Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods, purposive sampling “is the deliberate seeking out of participants with particular characteristics,” (Methods.sagepub.com.ez.sun.ac.za, 2017) a form of sampling that would work best with the exploratory nature of my research. Given that the purposive sampling process removes statistical generalisation as a criteria for evaluating the findings of the study; following an approach that allows for triangulation created more opportunities for the study to meet the criteria used to evaluate qualitative research. As the research is in the form of an exploratory study, it means that the limitation of purposive sampling – not being able to generalise – is not of great concern for this study (Bryman, 2012). One of the key characteristics at play was a degree of popularity: this helped to ensure that participant choice was not based only on a personal bias of interest in working with a particular blogger.

However, the use of popularity as a characteristic was tempered by my understanding of the mommy blogging community. As a fairly active participant in the community, in certain cases my knowledge lined up with the perceptions of others as to who the popular bloggers were. These perceptions included not just that of other readers, but those of fellow bloggers ... and, more telling for a discussion of social and cultural capital, the brands with whom the bloggers work.

Examining whether the bloggers worked with brands, and which brands they were, further established the popularity of those chosen from the potential participant pool. And as a reader of those blogs, it was easy to use brand work as a metric. I merely had to look at the recent posts on the blog. Within the recent posts, with anything from five to ten on the homepage, there would generally be one or two posts of sponsored content – up to four in some instances. This content included posts that were giveaways,

reviews or, in some instances, just the bloggers' views on something, that linked in well with a particular brand or product offered by a brand.

An example of the latter includes a post by one of the participants on family holidays and what they mean to her. The post included some difficult family memories, which were then the entryway into the rest of the post, which talked about her daughter's first family holiday, sponsored by a particular holiday brand. The post thus covered the range of a personal moment to relate to the readers, and then became an exercise in tasteful branding and consuming.

That particular participant was also one of five mommy bloggers (and one of three of the participants in this study) featured in a 2017 Mother's Day feature on a popular local radio station's website. Other members of the participant cluster have had both digital and print magazine, radio, and television appearances: all factors that played into the popularity control of the purposive sample. Another characteristic was that of looking for as wide a variety of perspectives/voices as possible. Hence my participants include a single parent family, an adoptive family, home schooling families, blended families, and large and small families.

The bloggers cover the middle class income spectrum – lower, middle and upper. They can all be considered part of the middle class in South Africa following definitions discussed by Visagie and Posel (2013). One of their definitions defines middle class using a middle income strata based on a per capita household income distribution; while the other uses a standard of lifestyle considered to be a middle class lifestyle (Visagie & Posel, 2013: 152 - 154). They all have some form of tertiary education, some have their own business, some are stay-at-home mothers, others work from home, with the rest working at their employer's place of business. And in line with Visagie and Posel's lifestyle definition for middle class; they all "own a telephone [/cell phone], television or vehicle" (2013:162) or rather, those involved with this research own all three.

I would include another dimension to the lifestyle definition: ease of access to the internet. At the very least, all of the participants access through their cell phones. Additionally, they have access at home either via a fixed line or another service, as well as at their place of work, for those who work outside of the home. After all, without access to the internet (among other factors) they would not be able to be part of this community.

‘Racially’<sup>5</sup>, they are predominantly ‘white’, again a factor that is likely to stem from falling within the lifestyle definition of middle class within South Africa. Two of the participants are in a ‘mixed race’ marriage, while another’s first marriage was ‘mixed’. Her two eldest children are considered ‘coloured’ while she and her younger two children are considered ‘white’.

Each participant has at least one living<sup>6</sup> child, the lowest number of children that a participant may have being one, with one participant having eight. The ages of the participants range from those in their mid-twenties to late forties. One of the participants is an expat; she is American, but has lived and worked here for at least a decade, and her spouse and child are South African. Building a life here makes the state of her nationality not a strong enough reason to exclude her – especially given that, like the other participants, she is also reflecting on mothering within the context of South Africa.

## **Technology, focus groups, and interviews**

One challenge during the research was keeping the aspects of it that could be affected by technology in check. It is – as discussed in Marres’ (2017) book – a question of to what extent the technology is being studied, versus the group. Here the technology being used is intertwined with the group being studied. There are aspects that remain universal in an existence pre-technology – parenthood, the change in self that it kick-starts your journey as a parent – but there are also aspects that are changed and shaped by the manner in which we have embraced technology. So, while this work looks at a group of mothers and their journey, the journey is made more interesting by the way they use of technology within their parenting journey. Thus, while this work is clearly focused on the group of women participating in the study, it cannot and will not shy away from looking at the technology used in the process of doing this research.

## **Focus groups without bodily cues**

A focus group is a form of group interview, including multiple participants and the facilitator. The emphasis is placed on questions on a defined topic, the group interaction and the joint construction of

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<sup>5</sup> While race is just a social construct, it is a construct that is unfailingly used to describe people, particularly in South Africa. And, as such, any mention thereof and categories related to it are used as the terms are understood within South Africa.

<sup>6</sup> I specify ‘living’ here, as some of the participants have had miscarriages, and one suffered the death of her daughter at eight months old.



meaning (Bryman, 2012: 712). Within this study, the focus group occurred online via WhatsApp instead of following the more traditional format of face-to-face.

Conducting the focus group in this format was chosen to make it possible for more participants to take part. It also made it possible for those whom I wished to be part of the participant pool to take part. This decision added to the decision to conduct it asynchronously (posting or sending a message not knowing when it would be seen or a response given (Salmons; 2016:4)) instead of attempting synchronicity (messages being sent and responded to at the same time (Salmons; 2016:4)) – which would have been possible with the application, or other forms of instant messaging. Selecting those who would take part in the focus group from the larger pool of participants, was decided in part by me, and in part by the participants.

I had approached those I had identified through the purposive sampling as the potential participant pool, with the hope that all would want to take part. And while the response to being a participant was a resounding ‘yes’ from all those I approached, not all were keen on being part of the focus group. The concern with taking part in the focus group for the most part stemmed from time constraints and an unwillingness to encounter certain other people. Most of the potential focus group participants asked who else would be taking part.

It was an unanticipated question, but one I should have expected. Because the focus group would occur via WhatsApp, all the participants would have access to each other’s cell phone numbers. There would be no way to hide that information from each other. At the same time, though, a face-to-face focus group would leave the participants being able to recognise each other outside of the group space. I found the request to know who else might take part an interesting question: knowing who else would be in a focus group with you before taking part in it is not the norm.

Fortunately, the participants who chose to take part in the focus group were all already known to each other, and in most cases they had previously swapped cell phone numbers. That the participants all had some form of a previously established relationship with each other certainly helped ease the way to conducting the focus group. These relationships also took various forms.

The intention was to have the group stay open for discussion points over a period of one day, but it ran from 26 October 2016 till 30 October 2016. And it had a resurgence in discussion from the members on

9 November 2016 due to the American elections, taking it from a space for discussions on questions put to them, and turning it into an avenue for supportive conversation.

At that point, I had not yet left the group and deleted it from my conversation list on the application: I was petrified of possibly losing the text, and keeping the conversation in my chat list meant that I – or if necessary, one of other participants in the group – would still be able to access it and e-mail the text to me. The resurgence reaffirmed the mommy blogging community as a space which draws together those who are looking for others going through a similar journey – a sense of reminding one that one is not alone, and an often cited reason for why people start to blog. Not all of the focus group participants took part in the resurged conversation amongst the group: it was about how to discuss the election with your primary school or older child, thus not all could contribute equally to that. However, there was support shared between all who took part in trying to think through what the ramifications of that particular election result would be.

For the most part the focus group ran asynchronously, but there were often moments of synchronicity. It was asynchronous in that there was no expectation for anyone to reply to anything immediately: they could reply when they were able. But there were often moments of simultaneous replies, leading to the participants asking questions of each other, and the following of the format of conversations conducted face-to-face. It was not always quite as easy as that, as one of the challenges was that those who were not online at the same time – or able to respond sooner – would be faced with a glut of messages and conversational threads to follow. It then hampered that person's participation. During the course of the focus groups one of the participants requested that the questions put forth by me be numbered. Others agreed: the numbering gave them an additional way to maintain the conversational threads. The numbering then unintentionally led to someone who had already answered a particular question, adding something new to it when one of the others referred back to it. This often sparked another person's thought process, which led to her adding more either to what she was talking about or going back to another point.

The glut of messages and following of conversational threads caused some difficulties for me, in the role of moderator. I often had to fight the urge to be constantly online, to restart conversations, and maintain the momentum. I had decided to try and moderate as little as possible. I wished to have as 'natural' a discussion as possible occur: for the insights to occur from talking with friends, and not a group of random strangers.

I reached that decision because of the participants wanting to know who else would be in the focus group, and everyone ‘knowing’ everyone else. With the group running over a number of days it was easy to identify the flow of the participants’ lives. The conversation would be at its peak during the mornings and early afternoons, slow down as the day progressed, and have very little to no interaction from the early evening till the next morning. The combination of the flow of the participants days’ and glut of messages created instances where there were some voices dominating the conversation.

The domination of the conversation by some voices does occur in focus groups run in the more traditional face-to-face manner, so observing it taking place in the WhatsApp focus group was unsurprising. Another concern around conducting the focus group online instead of face-to-face was the loss of bodily cues to express nuance, and for the moderator to know when to push further on an issue. While the difficulty of knowing when to push or hold back on a matter was not compensated for, there was minimal nuance and tone reduction, thanks to the use of emojis.

Emojis or emoticons were first based on a series of keyboard symbols, which later evolved to images or digital pictograms. They moved from being faces constructed using punctuation symbols, to include images of faces and other items (Riordan, 2017; Stark & Crawford, 2015). Emojis serve a pivotal role in digital, text-based conversation, not just as a form of shorthand, but also to allow the reader to be closer to reading what was shared with them as the writer intended. The loss of tone, and the other paralinguistic cues, is an ongoing problem with communication occurring via computer-mediated channels instead of in person. Emojis go a long way towards trying to correct for that. That emotion is not just expressed in terms of the images of faces, but also through the use of images of particular items.

The common, or rather material cultural understanding of what certain emojis mean or display, make use of the same language codes/signposts that we follow in speech. This use of emojis forms part of the change in script referred to in *Digital Sociology* (Marres, 2017: 60). In the section in which Marres (2017) touches on the concept of the script – with an example from Goffman, “The manner in which we stage our entrance when arriving in a room full of people” (as cited in Marres, 2017:59). This is then used to bring in a link to work by Akrich and Latour where they discuss the manner in which humans and non-humans are ‘acting in concert’; and not where humans are acting based on technology making them act in that manner (as cited in Marres, 2017:59). Here, in the focus group, is an observable instance of the technology/non-human, the emoji, ‘acting in concert’ with human – the group participant. It is clear that when using the emoji in the conversation the human and non-human are ‘acting in concert’. The human/participant is using the manner in which the technology is understood to further the way in which

she is understood. She uses the tech – emoji – to help minimise doubt or misunderstanding of what was said. After all, there is no clear or easy way to convey tone. Yes, all upper case letters does mean someone is shouting, but shouting in joy or anger would not be quite as clear without the context of emojis.

Coupled with emoji use, the participants having previously established relationships with each other also served to ensure that what was shared was understood as closely as intended by the writer. In some instances the previously established relationship was not that of a face-to-face meeting, but rather that of a familiarity with each other through other social media, including but not limited to their respective blogs, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. This meant that the participants had at the very least a passing familiarity with the views of the others, the way in which they expressed themselves and their sense of humour. These were all factors that enabled them to share easily and candidly within the group.

This passing familiarity with each other and the way they share and write, serves as a telling example of the scalable sociality Miller mentions. In the space of the focus group the scale was shown in the level of intimacy amongst the participants. It was clear that some of the ladies had a more familiar and comfortable relationship with each other: “Hahahaha. From what I can see there is only one person I haven’t worked with before 😊 but for etiquette purposes - hi I’m [Participant 1], and I’m a mommy blogger” (Participant 1). Here, when referring to “worked with before,” the participant is talking about collaborations on campaigns, posts and work for an online parenting site, which functions like a digital magazine. Additionally, it is interesting that the participant used work to refer to her familiarity with the other participants. By doing so she is making those she knows her work colleagues, which partially acts against the notion of blogging being a way in which to share your journey with others, and strengthens the thought of blogging as work.

The manner in which the participants interacted with each other aptly demonstrates that the distinction between the idea of digital and “real” worlds is no more for some, or rapidly diminishing for others. This is something seen and discussed in Miller *et al*’s (2016) book. Those interactions aptly display ‘scalable sociality’, whereby the participants engage with each other, and in the larger context, their readers, on varying levels. These levels have them treating and behaving differently across the range of social media which they make use of. Within the focus group, which makes use of social media – which WhatsApp is a tool of as per Miller *et al* (2016:2) where a private messaging tool was scaled upwards to include group messaging – the comments made by the participants were far more explicit than comments they made on similar topics on their blogs. This clearly adds to the fact that the manner in which we use the tools of

social media operate on various degrees of sociality, or rather degrees of intimacy. But what makes up those degrees of intimacy, and are they in any way actually different to degrees of intimacy we make use of in face-to-face interactions?

### **Interviews all the time, but never face-to-face**

With participants being scattered throughout the country, it was expected that there would be difficulty in arranging individual interviews. While I expected difficulties in arranging face-to-face interviews with those participants based in Johannesburg – and Pretoria for one participant – what I did not expect was the difficulties in trying to arrange the same with participants in Cape Town.

When I started the process of data gathering it was not feasible in terms of my budget to arrange a research trip to Johannesburg, which led to the decision to employ technology in conducting those interviews. The initial thought was to do so via Skype, which would allow me to gain some visual cues. However, given the daily time constraints that the participants faced – one of whom had recently had her second child, two launching new businesses, and all working within the daily hustle and bustle – and my desire to have a minimal impact on the participants, the plan changed to making use of telephonic, e-mail or WhatsApp interviews as needed.

In the end, four of the six participants in Johannesburg opted for telephonic interviews, with the others choosing e-mail. Three of the Cape Town participants opted for an e-mail interview – one wanting the questions in one go, the other two for the question-answer process, with the other Cape Town based participants, save one, opting for a telephonic interview. The one who opted for neither e-mail nor telephonic chose WhatsApp as the tool for her interview. All chose the option that they felt most comfortable with, that would have the least impact on their time, and which allowed them to be available to take part without interference from their children – all of which speaks to the often cited invisible labour that mothers perform. This meant that those with whom I conducted telephonic interviews worked with me to schedule the interview when their child/ren was/were at school, or having a nap, or would be occupied by their other parent.

Although WhatsApp is accessed via a smartphone (or for some via their computers), it does not qualify as a telephonic interview because as mentioned previously it is a social media tool. Thus, the participant who opted for using WhatsApp as the means to be part of the interview process chose that option for very similar reasons as those who opted for e-mail interviews – although this participant has a strong

aversion to voice calls, far more so than some of the other participants who voiced it as a reason for them preferring an e-mail interview.

The thought process that my participants followed to determine the best time for them to take part in the interview, was a very similar – if not the same – thought process I had to follow in order to be available to do so. I too had to consider my work schedule, and when my son would be at school or occupied by my husband to allow me to do the interviews.

Being able to understand the demands placed on the participants' time – demands that did not need to be verbalised or explained to me – reinforces my contention that being known to the participants was an advantage to the work. I was known to them not just in the role of friend, but also in the role of a fellow parent: it is just one of the things we have in common. There are things that only those in the role of parent are able to fully grasp.

For all but one of the telephonic interviews, the joys of a school<sup>7</sup> schedule, self-employment and/or working from home made it possible to conduct the interview during a week day morning. Only one interview occurred on a Saturday; with both the participant and I relying on our respective spouses to keep our offspring occupied. Both of us sequestered ourselves in a room away from our children, but she still had moments of interruption. Of the interviews that occurred with the Johannesburg participants, there were two that were very enjoyable to conduct, and three that hit the conversational tone/vibe I aspired to.

It is not surprising that one of the enjoyable and more conversationally toned interviews came from a participant in the Johannesburg set of participants - I had a more established friendship with her; it was also one of the longer interviews running at nearly two hours long. Yet, of the Johannesburg participants only two of them were people I had only had interactions with via their blog and Twitter. So, the fact that one of the more conversationally stilted interviews occurred with the participant that I had known for a number of years was very surprising. It was an interaction that led to my reconsidering my contention that being a known quantity to the participants would allow for more to come to the fore. It is that same interaction though, that put more emphasis on reflexivity in terms of separating what I know as a friend versus what I know as a researcher. It further highlighted the difficulties in conducting

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<sup>7</sup> In this case school covers not only traditional formal schooling from preschool up, but also nursery school or daycare which covers the years before children start formal schooling.

interviews telephonically and not face-to-face or in a manner that would allow for visual cues. By not being able to see the participants while interviewing them it became clear that without the aid of visual clues, some of the semiotic cues that could have lead the interview in different directions, were being missed.

The telephonic interviews with the participants based in Cape Town were overall far more enjoyable and easier to conduct than those with the participants based in Johannesburg. The ease of conducting those interviews, and the fact that they were all far more conversational in tone than those with the Johannesburg participants speaks to the nature of my relationship with those participants. I had, after all, met all the Cape Town participants face-to-face as well as through their blogs and Twitter – although for some of the participants only twice before, others far more.

I am uncertain as to what came first with the Cape Town participants, whether I came across their blogs and engaged with them via Twitter, or if it was the other way around. That I am unable to say with utter certainty as to which came first speaks to the way various forms of social media and the interactions that arise from them are intertwined. However, I can say with certainty that my relationships with all the participants occurred first via the internet, for months at a time, before the first face-to-face interactions. And of the Cape Town based participants, two are particularly close friends, and the three of us – with two other friends – speak daily, while in-person meetings are rarely managed. Yet, given the way in which we interact thanks to the tools of social media, one would be hard-pressed to say that there is a distinction between an ‘online’ and ‘offline’ life. There is no ‘IRL’ – in real life. Actions taken ‘online’ impact on things ‘offline’ and vice versa.

In general, while the telephonic interviews did give me tone and word choice to work with, it was still difficult to know when to push on a matter or not, apart from very obvious signs, such as many ‘umms’ and moments of silence. Additionally, especially when I was very aware of participants’ time constraints, and where the interview did not quite hit the conversational tone or a level of ease within the first few minutes, the interview tended towards the shorter side, running for 30 minutes. With those participants where a conversational tone was found within the first few minutes, the interview tended towards running longer: anywhere from 40 minutes to almost two hours. Those interviews reaffirmed my contention that being known to the participants would be of great aid to the work.

In contrast, the interviews on e-mail and WhatsApp did not reaffirm this contention. E-mail interviews were predominantly chosen by the participants in order to better work with their schedules (and so that



they did not have to speak on the telephone). Some e-mail interviews were done in the manner of a conversation; with me asking a question and then getting the reply. The reply to the question would then spark off another point or question, with the participants adding more or asking their own questions. The e-mail interviews that followed that route are the ones I consider more successful than the e-mailed interviews where the participant requested all the questions.

Some participants asked for all the questions in one go, so that they could set aside time once in order to answer the questions. The very obvious downside to these interviews is that it left little or no room to ask questions leading on from the participants' answers. This was a stark contrast to those where we went question by question. The argument could be made that the participants who had all the questions at once could then give greater consideration to their answers. But I do not believe that to be so for all of the participants. Where participants got the questions in one batch, the answering might not have been as carefully considered as those where we chatted via e-mail over a long period of time. Those who had all the questions might have felt rushed in order to just get it done, whereas those where we had a conversation going via e-mail did not seem to have the same sense of being rushed.

However, from time to time some participants did say, 'refer to answer above' or something similar, which could indicate that the participant did not have time to fully answer the question. There is some evidence in the e-mail interviews which ran in the form of question-answer, where the participant would make a remark about the question being tricky, or something they had not thought about. That, along with the time lapse between certain sections (some of the back and forth interviews ran over a number of days) left me with the impression that the answers were being carefully thought through. Additionally, one of the participants at the time of doing her interview was coping with a teething baby, so I am sure that at least for her, the questions coming in one at a time was helpful (an instance where one of the other roles I occupy aided the work).

The question is, why this emphasis on consideration? After all, those with whom I was conducting telephonic interviews would not be afforded the opportunity for long moments to consider their answers. When the words are written or, in this instance, typed, we take more care with our words, especially so when there is no way to ensure that the meaning or intention is clearly understood. It is the lack of visual cues to semiotics that can lead to your words being misunderstood, misinterpreted or taken too literally. Of course, the same concern applies to telephonic interviews. Fortunately, with the written word there are some stylistic conventions which can help to avoid any confusion. But those stylistic conventions



only help when they are shared and understood across the board. When they are not, the clearest way to ensure you are understood as you intend, is to be sure to consider your words carefully.

When you factor in that all the participants are bloggers, people who have chosen the written word to express themselves and share, it makes not just the decision to opt for an e-mail interview a slightly more obvious choice for them, but also the reason why I place an emphasis on consideration of the words used. In addition, a portion of this research includes a thematic analysis of the bloggers' blog posts, and an analysis of the structure of the blogs. Words are very, very important to the work as well as to the participants themselves, most of whom are either writers or working with words and writing on an almost daily basis. They form part of the "signs given naively, unconsciously, and signs given off consciously, deliberately (van Dijck, 2013:201) that the bloggers use as part of their presentation of themselves. The unconscious signs come from the words most often used, and the conscious comes more into play in terms of what is and is not said or shared. The use or omission of certain things paints a very particular picture of how the person doing or not doing so wants to create and share.

### 3. *Blogs – the electronic body*

For those who blog, “the blog becomes both the digital body as well as the medium through which the bloggers express themselves” (boyd, 2006). This thought of the blog as the blogger’s digital body can be seen in the way which bloggers stress the space as *theirs*: it is theirs and they control the look, feel and access to it (boyd, 2006).

The blogger establishes the conventions for interacting with her blog. The blog thus becomes both her digital form and her space – or rather, her corner of the internet as it is typically put. But it is a space, a form that is very clearly constructed, and as such constructed to put forth the best possible form of the blogger. It is a body that shows their interests, parts of themselves they believe others can relate to, but above all it is a carefully mediated construction of a form of themselves. Or as boyd (2006) puts it:

“In transition, the *space* of a blog is constructed as an artefact of the blogger’s performance in the witness of a blogging tool. A blogger does not perform to the space, but creates it as an artefact. Yet, in future engagements with the blog, they do not see it as a space they visit, but as a part of themselves. Conversely, the reader addresses the blog like a space. The more intimately the reader is connected with the blogger, the more they will respect it as an extension of the person.”

Viewing the space of a blog as an artefact indicates that the blog serves as the blogger’s electronic body. It also indicates that the blog serves as a body which allows her to experience the internet. It serves as her body in the manners in which others see it as her body, and in turn it is the sensing instrument for her interactions with others. As such, a blog is then more than a digital body for the blogger, it is also what she uses as a sensing instrument. It is both a space and not a space. It is more a combination of the two, but something that takes on certain aspects of a body or a space – corner of the internet – dependent on the blogger and the way she uses it.

However, that does not make it any less a carefully constructed representation of what the blogger wishes the audience to see. And as with all things, the control of the way in which something carefully constructed is seen can only be held in the bloggers control for a short time. Her audience also shapes the aesthetics of the space and the perception thereof. One of the ways in which this is perhaps more clearly seen is in the way the look/form of a blog goes through various trends. Some of the participants indicated that they did not particularly wish to follow those trends, but that readers expected it. And when you factor in that the blogger’s audience includes representatives of brands that might want to work with

her, those audience expectations count for a lot – they directly create the blog stats, which tally the all-important clicks, views and engagements.

The look of the participants' blogs follows a very similar style or form. This similarity of form reaffirms the view of the blog as an electronic body. A form, according to the participants, is a way in which to keep up with the trends for certain looks on blog sites. Currently, the form is more visual – like that of a print magazine.

The next section will discuss the anatomy of a blog. I will make use of my own blog to show the skeleton, if you will, of this electronic form of the bloggers' body online. The blog is an electronic body, and just as with the human form there are certain basic similarities, so do the blogs. And just the aesthetics make each body unique, so do the aesthetics of each blog. The basic form or body of a blog being the same across the board makes it possible for certain conventions to become standard – so much so, that if they are not there, they are seen as a glaring omission. A standardised form further allows for ease of understanding for the reader: without a reading audience expecting certain forms there would be no need to comply with the rules of the field. No rules would mean there would be no way to play the game and have some come out ahead of others.

## **Blogs, bloggers and influencers**

“What complicates analyses of blogs is that they are both the product of blogging and the medium through which the blogger produces their expressions. Blogs emerge because bloggers are blogging. And yet, what they are blogging to is the blog itself.” (boyd, 2006).

One of the terms central to this work, is ‘blog’, which is surprising for something with commonly agreed-upon roots. Nevertheless there are various definitions. Reed (2005) refers to blogs as an online journal or diary where “posts or entries were organised chronologically and updated regularly, the latest post appearing at the top of the page with back entries archived by date” (Blood, 2002: *ix* as cited in Reed, 2005). Rettberg (2008:17) defines a blog as follows: “The word blog is a contraction of the words Web and log. Blogs have developed considerably since the word was first used about a Web site in 1997, but the basic sense of a blog being some kind of log, kept on the Web, remains.” Merriam-Webster (2017) defines it as “a website that contains online personal reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks, videos, and photographs provided by the writer; *also* the contents of such a site; a regular feature appearing as part of an online publication that typically relates to a particular topic and consists of articles and personal commentary by one or more authors *a technology blog*”. Crystal (2006:15) says that it “is a distinctive

Web application which came into prominence in the early 2000s: *blog* is a shortened form of *weblog*. It takes the form of a personalized web page where the owner can post messages at intervals. Many blogs are personal diaries, ranging in length from brief notes to extended essays; many are on topics of general interest or concern, such as a hobby or political issue. Some blogs are monologues; some have shared authorship; some are interactive. The totality of blog-related websites is often called the *blogosphere*.” Overall it is key to keep in mind that blogs are “some kind of log, kept on the Web” (Rettberg, 2008:17), and that they are “a social genre [with bloggers writing] into the world with a clear expectation of having readers” (Rettberg, 2008:57).

Many of the bloggers become ‘influencers’ who make use of their social capital, or rather that: “aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to a credit” (Bourdieu, 1986). This credential that members of the group gain is a form of cultural capital used not only for reputational gain, but also transubstantiated for traditional capital gains. The process of transubstantiation is one “whereby the most material types of capital can present themselves in the immaterial form of cultural capital or social capital and vice versa” (Bourdieu, 1986). The popular blogger stands as a mark of distinction, which enables her to be a tastemaker – or in terms more fitting with current marketing strategies which make use of bloggers and other popular individuals on social media platforms, she becomes an influencer. By now standing as an influencer the popular blogger is showing that who she knows – social capital – adds to what she knows – cultural capital: a process that can potentially, over time turn her symbolic (intangible) capital into a (tangible) material gain.

### **Influencers and scalable sociality**

Scalable sociality specifically came from an observation made by Miller *et al* (2016) on the two key scales that social media platforms engage on:

“The first is the scale from the most private to the most public. The second is the scale from the smallest group to the largest groups. At one end of both of these scales we still see private dyadic conversation and at the other end we still see fully public broadcasting. What is it that is being scaled? The core to the study of social science is the way in which people associate with each other to form social relations and societies. This is called sociality. The best way to define what is popularly called social media

but also includes prior media is thus to describe the new situation as increasingly ‘scalable sociality’” (Miller *et al*, 2016:3).

At its core, scalable sociality is about the way we manage communication across social media. Thus, scalable sociality is not only key in considering how we manage our social relationships and ourselves across multiple social media platforms, but it also clearly plays a role in the way bloggers navigate and manage their brands across multiple social media platform. This management of scale is evident in the ways the platforms are used by bloggers to engage with their readers in spaces beyond their corner of the internet. It creates a space/opportunity for the readers to move beyond that of passive reading audience – especially in the case of those who do not comment on the blog – to having a more active role in their engagement with the blogger, and following more details of the story being shared. The various acts of following the blogger and her story across various social media platforms then establish a sense of ‘knowing’ the blogger, while not really ‘knowing’ her, especially if the reader follows more passively instead of actively engaging. By actively engaging I am referring to more than the act of the reader following the blogger on the various platforms, but to the reader liking, commenting, favouriting, and/or retweeting what the blogger is sharing. It is not the views that count in this instance, but rather what comes from them.

By using the various social media platforms as an extension of their blogs, and the sharing of stories, the blogger is further enhancing the community – ties are made and cemented by involvement with each other and by engaging on those smaller items that make up a slice of life. This aptly demonstrates scalable sociality in that in one space, communication is occurring in forms of one to one, one to a few, and one to many. And while the various social media platforms are spaces where the blogger is broadcasting, where it is at all times a communication of one to many, the way in which the space is constructed allows for a sense – and in the instances of private messaging – that communication occurs as one to one or one to few. As stated by Miller *et al* (2016:6): “[a] person may post a comment or image on their social media which will make sense only to the people to whom they are close, who understand what it refers to. Other people may be on the same site, but they will not get the significance – and are thereby excluded despite being present on this same platform.”

The sense of those who are in the know versus those who are not demonstrates a sense of intimacy that can be, and is, created and sustained through social media. It serves as a means to invite certain people into our lives, and maintain or further foster the bonds that exist. Many of the participants – as is the case for myself – have found deep, meaningful and sustaining friendships through blogging and the use of

other social media platforms. The use of social media daily serves to protect and enforce those bonds, but also to protect and reinforce the community that comes from being part of the South African mommy blogosphere.

Further, it is that play on knowing or understanding content from the blogger that adds to both the community and the bloggers standing as an influencer. The addition to the community is quite clear to see – it would involve sharing stories from others that relate to certain experiences that the blogger has shared before, to the use of certain terms to refer to something that only those within the community will understand. The addition to the blogger's standing as an influencer is not quite as clear, but it occurs in the same way as which it adds to the community. Instead of being limited to a small group of in-the-know people – those within the community, and those who make up her readers – the addition as an influencer comes when the blogger moves beyond those who are within the community and readers. This move is without doubt made possible due to her standing within the community, as without those people and her readers being part of the process whereby she actively shares and grows her readership, she would not be able to gain in influence.

Once the blogger is seen as an influencer – aided by the manner in which she uses scalable sociality on certain platforms – she then becomes a member of a sub-community of influencers. This comes with a complex set of problems, including but not limited to the question of authenticity. There appears to be a continuous tension between those who take part in and make public their creative content and those who read/view those efforts, and the tension grows as more opportunities arise for the one creating and sharing the content. The tension is brought to the fore with questions of authenticity (something examined in more detail in the next chapter).

The blogger/influencer is now part of the sub-community or rather sub-field, as she still falls within the mommy blogger community, and within the popular mommy blogger one; she is then added or seen as belonging to that of influencer. And while one could argue that being a popular mommy blogger automatically would make one an influencer, this is not the case. The measurement for being an influencer is about the size of your readership, the engagement you receive, and how you work with brands. So, while all the bloggers who make up the participant cohort in this study are popular bloggers, they are not all influencers. It must be said, though, that those who are not influencers are not so by choice – something that will be touched on in the next chapter when looking at the ways in which some bloggers worked through the changes in self brought on by blogging and motherhood.

## Locating the field

It seemed easy enough to say that this work would be an exploration of South African mommy bloggers, but what is the mommy blogosphere field – the social space with its rules that make the habitus of the agents – being studied? Or is it more likely that it is a sub-field of a dominant field, and if so which field? At play is the way in which the particular field is constructed. In looking at the construction of the field, it is most likely to answer the question of whether or not the mommy blogosphere is a dominant field or sub-field of a different field. In order to answer this, it is best to establish just what is meant by field.

In understanding Bourdieu's concept of field, Thomas (2012) uses an analogy that both draws on Bourdieu's analogy of a soccer field, and adds clarity through her own working of it.

“There are many analogies for Bourdieu's *champ*: (1) the field on which a game of football is played (*le terrain* in French); (2) the field in science fiction, (as in “Activate the force-field, Spock”); or even (3) a field of forces in physics. Bourdieu's concept of *champ*, or field, contains important elements of all of these three analogies while equating to none of them” (Thomas, 2012:66).

If we are to take the football field to locate this study, it is clear then that the mommy blogosphere is a field that does not stand on its own – it is a subfield of the dominant South African blogosphere. I believe this is a sub-field of the dominant South African social media one, which is a sub-field of another dominant field ... and so on. The key here is that the sub-field of the South African mommy blogosphere has its own rules, informed by the dominant blogosphere rules; it does not stand on its own. And at stake in this game is that of capital: social and cultural capital in the form of perceived expertise and popularity that can be transformed into economic gain/capital. The participants receive this gain in the form of “freebies<sup>8</sup>”, review opportunities and sponsored content – all of which is paid-for work.

In viewing the South African mommy blogosphere as a sub-field of the South African blogosphere, it draws on the idea of a field similar to that of a force field in science fiction terms.

“Science-fiction force fields are constructed through the erection of a barrier between what goes on inside and what happens outside. Designed to protect insiders, they constitute little self-contained worlds. The activities inside follow regular and ordered patterns and have some predictability; without this, the social world inside the force field would become anarchic and cease to function. The social order on fictional spaceships is hierarchically structured: not everyone is equal, and there are some people who are dominant and who have decision-making power over the ways in which

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<sup>8</sup> There are no freebies. There may be the appearance of freebies, but as shown in later chapters, nothing is really given for free.

the little social world functions. However, the rules on the self-contained starship are also those which operate on other similar craft and while some local variation is both possible and necessary for survival, there is a common pattern of operations among spaceships” (Thomas, 2012: 68).

Thus, the mommy blogosphere is a spaceship in the space of the South African blogosphere, while the South African mommy blogosphere is one in the entire mommy blogosphere – it draws back to an overlap of dominant and subfields. This analogy best encompasses the variations that are to be observed between the South African blogosphere in general and the South African mommy blogosphere. The similarities in the patterns of behaviour and what to do in terms of blogging conventions in both have South African bloggers siding with each other in getting those who do not blog to see what makes up the work of blogging. And it also extends to provide explanation for why my participants – and the general mommy blogosphere – view the public perceptions of what they do as inaccurate, and with degrees of anger.

The analogy even works when one considers that changes can and do affect the rules of the various spaces. But the analogy is limited. Limited, not only if one takes the view of the crew of the mommy blogging ship in acting as an influencer in the limited field of the mommy blogosphere, but also in that the idea that a spaceship is a fixed container while the ways the fields and those operating in the fields overlap. The rest of Thomas’ analogies for understanding fields has one considering fields in terms of vectors, which exert forces on each other and objects (Thomas, 2012: 69). In this instance, the vectors or forces are those of the various forms of capital. And at play in this study is the manner in which the bloggers who make up my participant group work their cultural capital into economic capital; taking their knowledge of the rules of the game as a means to set their distinction, as the embodied taste for others.

## **Blogging 101**

Aside from the blog and blog post form (discussed in the sections below) there are “rules” to starting a blog, especially if you intend to take your blog beyond just being a space to share your story. There are clearly some form of rules to blogging, especially when one considers just how many posts and sites are dedicated to starting a blog, and the various tips and tricks you need to use to grow your audience – there seems to be a never-ending obsession with growth. The rules, though, are similar for those who wish to use their blogs as a platform for work, as well as for those who use it so find a community. The rules that are common to both include finding a theme, deciding on a topic, or your niche.



The niche is important for those who wish to go the influencer route, as no niche means no market, but it is also important to the blogger seeking community, because you need to be able to have something you can talk about for days.

Other common considerations are choosing your blog name, choosing a blogging platform, making the blog feel like you by having it be unique, and socialising by joining networks, other social media sites and groups. And most importantly, “blogging takes courage. ... it takes courage to stand by your opinions and beliefs. Blogging by sheer definition means you are basically putting your life out there, everything you do, the decisions you make and the brands you want to associate with” (Participant 3).

## Anatomy of a blog 101

In this discussion the focus will be on the elements you see on the blog’s home page: the first thing you see if you go to a blog instead of a specific post on that blog.

All blogs have a title. Without a name for this body there will be one less way for you to distinguish your body – or corner of the internet – from all the others. Titles serve as a large contextual clue to the reader as to what the content of the blog is most likely to cover. A subheading is often included, to further aid the reader in knowing what the blog is about. This can be seen in Figure 3:1, along with the arrow indicating the title, *Bits and pieces*, there is an arrow showing the subheading: ‘A blog about life – the good, the bad, the people, the books, the games, coffee and food’. Here the title does not give much of a clue as to the blog’s content, but the subheading does. Along with the subheading, the ‘About’ block on the right-hand side of the screen also provides contextual clues to the reader about the content of the blog. It is rare for blogs not to follow the right-hand side convention. Those who do not, stand out for not doing so.

The right-hand side of the blog is most often where the ‘About’ block, any badges and widgets<sup>9</sup> the blogger might have, the subscription bar and where the blogger is on other social media, appears. The right-hand side also tends to be the space where any advertisements go. The ‘About’ block does what the name says, but it is within that space that the reader is given more clues as to the personality of the blogger, and whether this is a person with whom they wish to go on a journey. Of course, the blog title and general layout are factors in that too, but the ‘About’ block starts to give the reader a glimpse into

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<sup>9</sup> A stylised piece of code that displays an image: it can include countdowns, cross-posting from another site, etc.

the blogger's writing style. An 'about' block generally includes a photo or illustration of the blogger, their name or pseudonym, some general details, and sometimes, a hook to get you to read further.

The use of badges and/or other widgets are also contextual clues as to who this person is. What they choose to show or not show is an indication of what you could expect to see, and of trends. As general layout trends change, so to do the widgets and badges people use change. Examples include hit counters, indications of where readers are from, a blog role – all items that until as recently as late 2015 were common items on display. Now the widgets and badges include showing the latest Instagram posts, tweets, comments on posts, blogging competition wins, and group associations.

Some blogs, have the different categories – or tags – used within the blog appearing on the right-hand side as well. Others have the categories along the top of the blog under the banner image – which often has the blog title in it. The categories act as a shorthand for those already familiar with the blog, and the posts they enjoy reading; while those who are coming to the blog as a potential new reader use the categories to help determine if a blog is for them or not. Making use of the categories also helps the reader in reading previous posts on topics that they are interested in.

Another way that categories help a new reader is by helping them to find much older post that might relate to something current. Blog posts appear in reverse chronological order – latest first – so the reader is always jumping into the current, or as close to current, part of the blogger's story. Thus, when there is something about the story being shared that the reader wishes to know more about, there is an easy way (significantly easier than using the blog archive) to navigate what has come before. Navigating between past and present aspects of the bloggers sharing journey does not only show the changes within the blogger's life, but also shows the change in trends, and for the purposes of this research, it can help to pinpoint when/if any changes occurred during the process where the blogger went from being just someone sharing to someone sharing with attached economic gain.

Figures 3:2 and 3:3 both show other typical features you are likely to see on a blog home page. In Figure 3:2 the arrows indicate a widget, a post preview, the tags used to categorise the posts, and buttons to share the post via other social media channels. Figure 2:3 shows the bottom end of the home page: including theme support details, and intellectual property information. Within my blog I make use of

creative commons<sup>10</sup>, while most of the participants maintain all their intellectual property rights. This means that care is taken to watermark pictures with either the blog's name or the blog owner's full name. Some of the participants have had to deal with numerous instances of others stealing their content, including not only their words, but their images and pictures of their child/ren.

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<sup>10</sup> "Creative Commons is a global non-profit organization that enables sharing and reuse of creativity and knowledge through the provision of free legal tools. [Their] legal tools help those who want to encourage reuse of their works by offering them for use under generous, standardized terms; those who want to make creative uses of works; and those who want to benefit from this symbiosis" (Creativecommons.org, 2017).

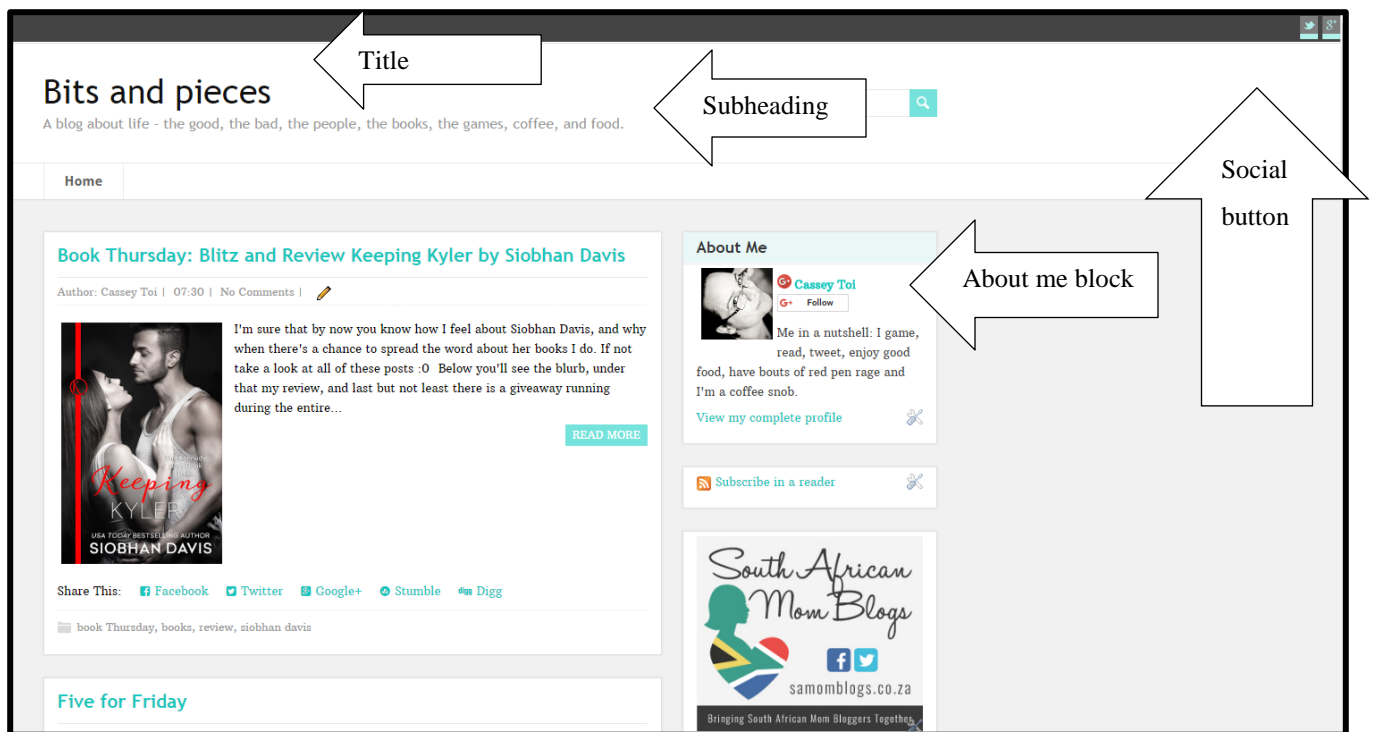


Figure 3:1 Homepage of researcher's blog


The image shows a section of a blog homepage with several widgets and a post preview. Annotations highlight specific elements:


- Widget:** Points to a circular badge for "tums2tots columnist" featuring two cartoon rabbits.
- Post preview:** Points to a book review post titled "Book Thursday: Blitz and Review Saying I Do by Tracey Alvarez". The post includes the author "Cassey Toi", a timestamp "07:30", and "2 Comments". It features a book cover for "Saying I Do" by Tracey Alvarez and a "READ MORE" button.
- Tags:** Points to a tag "Music day" on a post titled "Music day" by "Cassey Toi" at "09:45".
- Sharing buttons:** Points to the social media share icons (Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Stumble, Digg) located below the "Music day" post.

Other visible widgets include a "2017 Reading Challenge" showing progress (180 of 200 books, 90%) and a "2016 Reading Challenge" showing completion (387 of 100 books, 100%). A "Categories" list is also present on the right side.

Figure 3:2 Section of homepage, post preview on the left, with badges and widgets on the right.

## Currently


Author: Cassey Toi | 09:58 | 2 Comments | 




Watching: Legends of Tomorrow with Jerall, Avatar with Keiden and CrashCourse videos Reading: As much Bourdieu as I can get my hands on. And the Myths & Legends Boxset. Listening: This, over and over for some reason Doing: Thesis work, prepping for a presentation to my department...


[READ MORE](#)

Share This: [f Facebook](#) [t Twitter](#) [g Google+](#) [s Stumble](#) [d Digg](#)

 currently, life, random

## 34


Author: Cassey Toi | 15:11 | No Comments | 




This guy is 34 today. Happy birthday lov...


[READ MORE](#)

Share This: [f Facebook](#) [t Twitter](#) [g Google+](#) [s Stumble](#) [d Digg](#)


 birthdays, Jerall

## Blog Archive


- ▶ 2017 (41)
- ▶ 2016 (334)
- ▶ 2015 (171)
- ▶ 2014 (44)
- ▶ 2013 (9)
- ▶ 2012 (72)
- ▶ 2011 (129)
- ▶ 2010 (109)
- ▶ 2009 (10) 


Powered by [Blogger](#). 

## Theme Support

[+ BLOGLOVIN'](#) 

## Pages

- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [My bucket list](#) 




This work by Cassey Toi is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#). 

Figure 3:3 End of homepage, archive, pages and intellectual property details.

## Anatomy of a blog post

While the overall look of a blog is important, and especially the way the similarity of its form is a means to fit within the field that is the blogosphere, it is not just the home page of the participants' blogs that are key to this research. This research makes use of blog posts selected based on the themes emerging from the focus group and interviews. Making use of the posts adds another dimension to the voices and experiences of the participants, as the posts occur wholly in their domain – these are their sites, their words, their time, and their careful construction of it all, on display for all to see. Importantly, the blog acts as the primary means for the participants to gain the attention of readers and brands.

A blog post will always have a title, and a time stamp, but not all posts have a comment and share section. Some blogs have the comments turned off. This happens for a variety of reasons including but not limited to the topic of the post being of such a nature that the blogger does not wish to moderate comments. Sometimes she might also wish to change the space in which she engages with her readers, or the post is older and the blogger wants to avoid spam.

While there are no clearly defined rules on blog posts, it is extremely rare for the popular blogger not to include at least one image. Similarly, it has also become unusual for the popular blogger – especially those who fall within the participant pool – to have short posts. They tend more towards being longer, featuring at least four paragraphs of four or more sentences. Posts typically end with a sentence or two asking for a response from the reader. They also include an invitation to share the post, or engage with the blogger on other social media platforms. A post is never just a post: it is a means to engage with the audience, which is one way to expand your brand – for the cynical – or share stories and your journey with those who can relate.

To take a closer look at the anatomy of a blog post, here too I will make use of my own work, in Figure 3:4, below. I am in no way a popular blogger, but using one of my own posts serves to assist in protecting the anonymity of my participants. Additionally, by being part of the community I, just like my participants follow the “unwritten” rules of the space, in terms of post form. The thought of these “unwritten” rules is at the core of Bourdieu's habitus. Here we see the “conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produc[ing] habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (Bourdieu, 1990:53). What we have is certain conditions, or histories – as discussed in the chapter on habitus in *Logic of*

*Practice* – creating a system of structures, that inform the structures which then inform behaviour and ways of being.

It is the body's history of interactions with the practical world that creates the body as a structure that interacts with the world (Bourdieu, 1990:53-54). This history, which informs the structure, is something that the body always carries with it – it is what creates “all the ‘reasonable’, ‘common sense’, behaviours (and only these) which are possible within the limits of these regularities, and which are likely to be positively sanctioned because they are objectively adjusted to the logic characteristic of a particular field” (Bourdieu, 1990:55-56). Within the field of the mommy blogosphere we see the way in which these ‘common sense’ and ‘reasonable’ behaviours are accepted in the uniformity of blog form. We see the use of terms and conventions to further entrench the expected behaviour and choices made by those in the field. While there may be other options – or blog and post forms – they do not belong because they do not fall into the logic of the field. The history of the field is inscribed onto the blog as a body.

The first thing you would notice about the post in Figure 3:4 is the title, which serves as a textual clue for the reader. It should be designed to grab the reader's interest. It has an image – following the trend for visuals in posts. The topic is located and made personal by sharing that the idea is a scary one and why I wanted to follow through on the idea. And it ends with asking for reader participation. This is something you will see in most posts, as blogging is part of a community act; it is a conversation that happens within that space. You will also see the tags used in the post, which is part of categorising and organising the topics appearing on the blog.

Below the post, you will see all the comments that were made by readers and the post author. Figure 3:4 indicates the comment indicator and the total comments on the particular post used. Figure 3:5 has an example of some of the comments to the posts. Figure 3:5 also shows the threaded reply option – threaded replies allow for the readers to respond to each other in conversation. It is also one way people comment on articles and opinion pieces on various websites, particularly when readers take contrasting opinions or stances. Threaded replies can, depending on the topic and audience, take on a life of their own. Sadly, this is most commonly seen when people either start trolling<sup>11</sup> or attacking each other.

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<sup>11</sup> “Antagonizing (others) online by deliberately posting inflammatory, irrelevant, or offensive comments or other disruptive content ... trolls engage in the most outrageous and offensive behaviours possible” (Merriam-Webster.com, 2017).



Comments make the reader an active part of the narrative, which allows for the reader to share their story without the commitment of having a blog. It also enables the blogger to see that she is not writing into a void: she feels heard and seen. After all, is a blogger still a blogger if there are no readers? This question is answered across the next two sections.

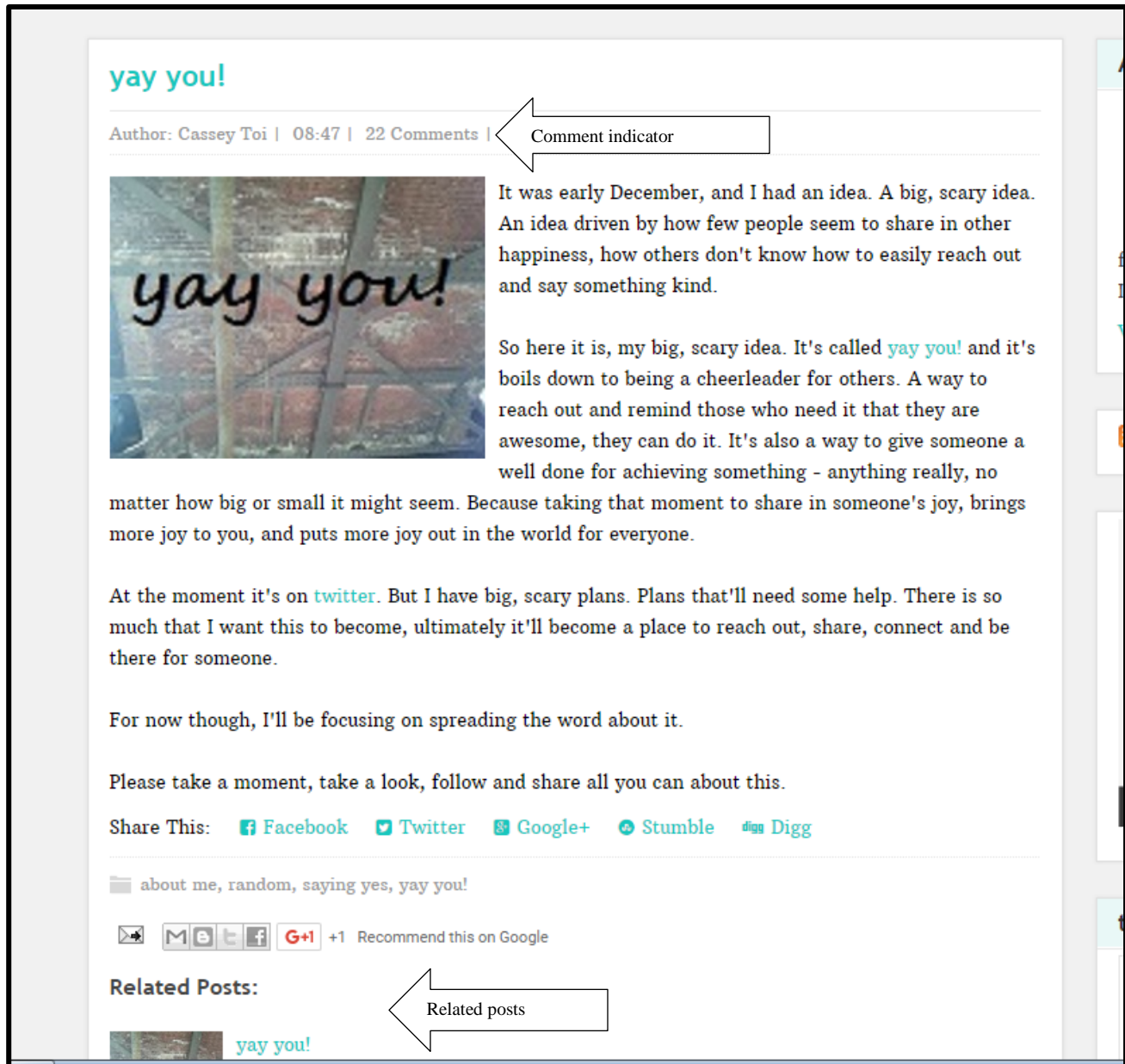


Figure 3:4 Example post

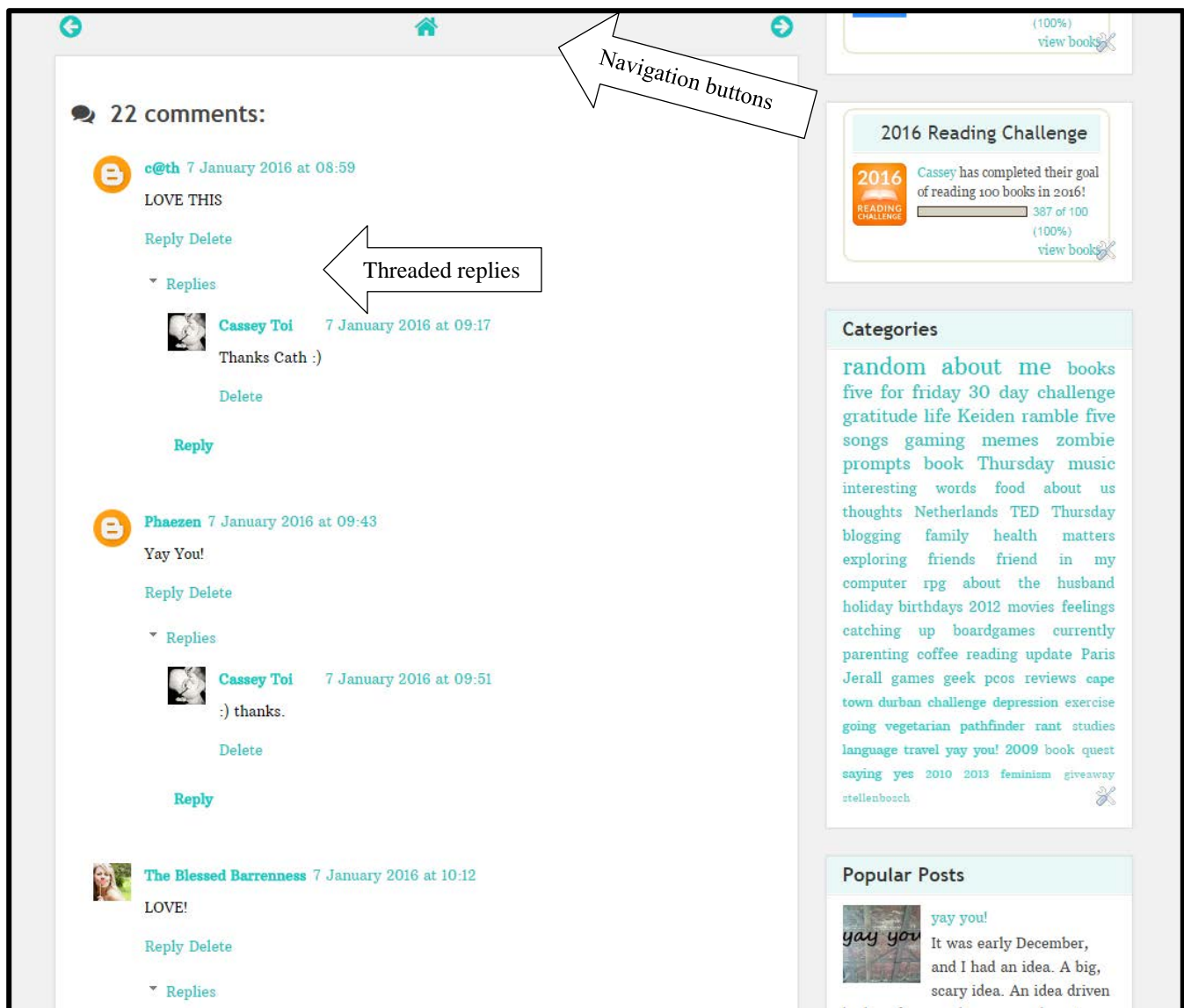


Figure 3:5 Comments on display below post

## Why blogging, why sharing

As a whole the participants indicated that blogging for them was a space to record memories and experiences for their children: "... For me blogging is about capturing the pieces of our lives that I want to remember and that I want the kids to remember" (Participant 5). It also serves as a creative space, to work through ideas and feelings, to share their story so that others would not feel alone, and in sharing to not feel alone, they also hope to find others like them and build a community. Participant 12 stressed that a large part of why she keeps on blogging is due to the relationships and community with her readers – and that those relationships are also key to the way in which she works with brands.

Part of having a space to work through things included making the space a place to vent, to rant ... and ultimately to share with those who might have some sense of just what it is that you are working through. Often the phrase, “cheaper than therapy” would be used, and considering that therapy is a space that allows, or rather encourages, one to share and work through something bothering you, it makes sense that blogging would be considered in that vein.

“I started my blog late last year because I wanted to. I needed a place to vent, to share my thoughts. I wanted to help open people’s minds and to expose them to a different side of society. I wanted to show people that fitting into a neat little box is not an option for everyone, and that it is okay. I wanted to tell my stories, as boring as they may be. Mostly blogging is a hell of a lot cheaper than therapy. **I blogged for me.** The fact that my blog grew really quickly and that you guys actually read it is a massive bonus!” (Participant 13).

But is it really therapy? There is no control over who hears the story, the space it is shared in, and the response to what you share is not always constructed in a manner to be of help to you rather than harm. Additionally, there is no guarantee of safety – what is said/shared can be, in the case of malicious people, be used against you to cause harm – one participant reported having had to deal with a stalker, and another is often the target of aggressive foul language, because she has adopted children across racial lines. In addition, there’s no guarantee that the words and images shared will remain yours: there are many incidents of others stealing words and images and attempting to pass them off as theirs. This happened to one of the participants despite her very clear and visible copyright policy.

Rather, if we are to follow the therapy analogy it is more likely to be that of a lopsided form of group therapy. There is no mandated sense of treating each other with care, giving weight to what all say, nor is there a balance of time or attention for each person – be it the blogger or reader – involved with the process. Instead, what we have is a space that is wholly mediated and considered as belonging to the bloggers.

“I have realized that what I love most about my blog is the fact that it is MY blog... I am my own boss. I can publish what I want to, when I want to and spend as much time on it as I feel like. I can swear, throw a tantrum, babble on and on about whatever is on my mind or go for days without posting a thing. ... Blogging for me has always been about writing content that hopefully people enjoy and relate to and, if I’m lucky, want to share. ... I think as mommy bloggers (*especially*) we need to give ourselves a break. The only person who’s judging is you” (Participant 13).

In a post talking about a blogger event she attended, Participant 1 not only shared why she blogs, but by doing so she also exemplified the community and sense of belonging that she found from it.

“These are the amazing awe-inspiring women that have come into my life through this little place of mine on the interwebs. Through me sharing my less than perfect view on pregnancy and parenthood and the loneliness it brings, I have found a tribe of other women who have felt the same things. Motherhood can feel isolating and lonely when we are doing it alone – and it always feels like we are; but if you look up and reach out you will find you are surrounded by other moms feeling exactly the same way. Luckily this particular part of my tribe are all bloggers; so you can reach out and add them to your tribe by just clicking a button” (Participant 1).

Here the blogger is drawing on having her own space to share her thoughts on parenthood and what it brought her. The sense of sharing, of knowing that you are not alone in your feelings – be they the loneliness of motherhood, dealing with grief or just something small that added brightness or a spot of sadness to your day – is what draws people too, and arguably, keeps them blogging. And from the quote above it is clear that this blogger feels the need to share with her readers who the people are who give her support. Some are likely to be bloggers themselves, and others are found in her space in the internet, and give her that sense of not feeling alone. That sharing of who those other bloggers are further enhances the community – the more readers, the more bloggers, the more stories being shared and support being given when needed.

“For me, my blogging is constantly evolving, I think it’s also why I resist the Mommy Blogger term so much. My blog has been infertility focused, adoption focused, parenting focused and now it’s VERY much about what I like and less about my kids. So I select the brands I work with based on what I like or what my kids like. Also, what is involved in what they’re asking. I treat my blog like a business, a second job and I dedicate a few hours to it every single day” (Participant 2).

Thus, to answer the question if a blogger is still a blogger without readers based on what the participants shared we are left with a yes/no answer. On one hand, without readers a blogger is not a blogger: “Blogs are a social genre. Bloggers don’t simply write to their ‘Dear Diary’, they write into the world with a clear expectation of having readers” (Rettberg, 2008:57). But, if we take into consideration the reasons the participants gave for blogging, it indicates that while having readers and the community that comes from it is a big part of blogging, it is not the entire reason they blog. They blog to have the space just for themselves, to do something creative and to think things through – after all, the act of writing is an act of thinking things through. Thus, in that sense, a blogger is still a blogger even without readers ... she is just writing for herself on a public platform.

## Writing and blogging

While the content of a blog is not restricted to writing, it is clear that without writing the blogs considered and used for this research would leave us with something else. While there are blogs that focus on illustrations, photos, videos and the like without the use of writing to convey some part of the narrative, the story presented to readers would be missing the intangible thing that speaks to the reader, and which sparks the connection that results in the building of the community. Therefore it is important to explore the aspects of writing as they relate to the blog, and other aspects of social media.

One of the most important aspects of blog writing is the sense of the story being told. The story being shared is what serves to create and join a community (something looked at in more detail in the next chapter). Given that bloggers share their stories in a series of posts, it is not surprising that there are blogs that go on to be printed and published ... but is that then a novel? Is the blog really that different to a novel? Especially, when one considers that the novel was birthed from the serialized form of stories in newspapers<sup>12</sup>. While going down that particular path of thought would be an exercise in fun, Rettberg has given the answer ... and it is clearly no.

“The most obvious difference between narrative in a blog and in a novel, is that the stories in blogs are told in brief episodes. Each post in a blog has a beginning and an end, and can in principle be read on its own. Read together, the posts create a larger story” (Rettberg, 2008: 111).

The brief episodes that posts give us are set apart from a novel in that they are perhaps short stories, or in the case of long posts, novellas (not to forget the obvious distinction between fiction and non-fiction). Aside from that blogs are set aside from short stories and novellas in the way in which they are written. The way in which a post is constructed, and the way in which the blog’s form is constructed and maintained, makes the writing that occurs with blogging different to the writing encountered in other online communities – such as forums, pages and chat groups. Strongly, making the case for the blog as a genre of writing distinct to other genres of writing.

While blog writing is different to those encountered in other online communities, it is also similar, similar in that blogs are conversational constructed, and perhaps read, and thus they fall more into the space of writing as a speech act (Crystal, 2006). Added to that, it is a speech act that makes use of some props and

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<sup>12</sup> See the introduction to Terry Eagleton’s book *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, the first chapter in Eagleton’s *The English Novel: An Introduction*, Keating’s *The Hunted Study: A Social History of the Novel* and Raymond Williams’ *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*.

non-verbal communication cues to further assist the reader in getting as close to the blogger's intended communication as possible, without them having a verbal conversation. It is writing as a speech act because although the blog post is a carefully considered and constructed act, it is done in a way that more closely resembles speech than the more formalistic acts of writing (Crystal, 2006).

When one considers the informal conversational tone taken, more often than not, and the way that posts often end with a question to spark further conversation in the comment section, as well as the request to share the post with others, we can see that these are all actions that would not be attributed to more formal pieces of writing, such as a magazine article or book. Within those genres of writing, the sharing and conversation around it would occur informally, and rarely amongst the writer and reader. And when the use of emojis, GIFs<sup>13</sup>, photos, and other images are included within a post; they stand as the non-verbal communication cues to not only assist the writer in ensuring that the post is read as intended, but they further speak to the blog post as writing as a speech act in that those cues convey the emotions of the writer.

Emotional tone is one of the hardest things to clearly convey in writing, and when the writing is being used to create and share stories within a community it becomes even more important. And while there may be highly emotional posts that do not make use of emojis, GIFs, photos or other images to convey the emotion or strength of emotion the writer is feeling, there are other conventions used in internet written communication to assist.

It is important to remember that internet communication is conveyed through 'Netspeak', and it is done by following a number of its own conventions (Crystal, 2006:19). Those conventions all stress the use of writing as a speech act when online, regardless whether it is in a blog post, forum post, tweet or Facebook comment thread. These conventions for 'Netspeak' include using asterisks for word or phrase emphasis, all caps to indicate shouting and the separation of letters in a word to add both emphasis and clarity (Crystal, 2006:37). We do all these things far more easily with verbal communication – aside from the emphasis that comes from those who are more physically expressive when talking – the most clear and useful of which is tone. In addition to the use of those conventions to assist in clearly displaying tone

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<sup>13</sup> "A computer file format for the compression and storage of visual digital information; also an image or video stored in this format" (Merriam-Webster.com, 2017).



and emotion, and assisting in ensuring that what has been written is understood as intended, is that of familiarity.

The more the blogger posts and is read, the more those who read her get a sense for her writing style. In doing so, a shorthand for that blogger is being created between her and those who read her, a shorthand that extends beyond the blog to other social media platforms. This further ties the community together, but also clearly displays scalable sociality at play. The shorthand for the blogger that the readers develop in understanding her, works in the blogger's favour, especially on platforms where the character count is limited, or when she has less time to devote to a platform, thereby having less time to fully respond and engage with her audience.

The familiarity that the audience would have with the blogger can become both something positive and negative when she becomes more popular and starts to be regarded as an influencer. We see this clearly in comment sections. This is likely to happen when the blogger has scheduled a post for a certain time, it goes live, gains attention and perhaps stirs up some controversy. Until the blogger can respond to comments herself, the readers and their comments to others can at times provide more understanding for those who are new to her – or there for the controversial post that has gained traction. In the case where the blogger is being attacked, her readers would defend her: in that instance the comment section takes on a life of its own, and familiarity with the blogger, and the shorthand the reader has developed in understanding her, works in the blogger's favour. In those instances, the negative is the way in which the readers 'speak' for the blogger, and the antagonism between readers is something that the blogger essentially needs to police. She is placed in the position of using her space to display power, when she might not have wanted to.

This is just one act of power. Another can be observed in the way the space is used to talk/work through thoughts, an act which includes writing back to others. It's an important act, especially when one considers the way in which modern motherhood is subject to 'new momism' (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). Douglas and Michaels state that "new momism is a highly romanticized and yet demanding view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet. [It] is a set of ideals, norms, and practices, most frequently and powerfully represented in the media, that seem on the surface to celebrate motherhood, but which in reality promulgate standards of perfection that are beyond your reach" (Douglas & Michaels, 2004: 4-5).

Mothers suffer the judgement of parenting more often and more harshly than fathers<sup>14</sup>, thus the power that blogging can give to the blogger is more valuable than we realise. It allows her to have her say, and while there is no guarantee that it could sway anyone's opinion fully, it does allow the blogger to know that she said what she needed to say, and let the matter go as best she can.

Earlier this year, a conversation started on Twitter among members of the mommy blogging community about sending sick children to school. It resulted in various posts, some which were about not doing so ever and others explaining why it happens, and one cannot help but think about the way in which the blogger is wielding her power and influence in order to justify her parenting choices. The blame for the fact mothers feel the need to justify those choices can be laid at the feet of standards of perfection that no one can reach. In her post on the matter, Participant 13 demonstrates not only her understanding of how to use certain props of blog post writing to get people to read a post, but she also subverts expectations of the post. The post starts with "Dear mom dropping her sick kids off at school ..." while the next line subverts the expected rant by stating:

"A few years ago, I would have been furious and irritated with you. I would have thought you were selfish, and that it was a mean thing to do. I mean, how could you? Leaving your poor child miserable in the hands of other people, infecting those around him/her with their germs. Well, I know better now ... and I am so sorry. I am so sorry I judged you, I did not know your situation. I had no right" (Participant 13).

Here the blogger is not just talking to the judgement others experience, but also how she was once someone who did something similar. And she brings it back to something for her readers – and the community at large – to consider and bring to their thought process by saying that "maybe I am selfish, maybe I am just a bad mom and human being – but I am doing the best I can. Maybe I have this all wrong, but I think we need to think about all these things before we judge other parents" (Participant 13).

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<sup>14</sup> One only needs to look at the way in which tragedies that befall children are handled in the media - <http://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2016/06/01/480284223/a-gorilla-is-killed-and-our-parent-shaming-culture-springs-to-life> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/blame-the-parents-child-tragedies-reveal-empathy-decline/> <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/06/16/health/gorilla-gator-attack-compare-trnd/index.html> <https://www.romper.com/p/reactions-to-the-disney-gator-attack-reveal-exactly-whats-wrong-with-perfect-parents-12603>

There is an interesting article from Ylanne, *Too, old to parent? Discursive representations of late parenting in the British press* which discuss the manners in which late motherhood and parenthood is constructed in the media. An article by Helen Peterson *Absent Non-fathers: Gendered representations of voluntary childlessness in Swedish newspapers* goes further in looking at the manners in which those who are childfree are portrayed, with those views contrasted by the media interest in a father of six. Lastly, Hannah Hamad's "*Hollywood's hot dads*": *tabloid, reality and scandal discourses of celebrity post-feminist fatherhood* takes care in painting a very careful picture of the manners in which male celebrities have their fatherhood and masculinity framed in a way that infantilises their female partner.



Her use of ‘I’ and invoking being a bad mom, is one that helps to create a sense of a shared story or journey – we all have been judged and we have all judged others.

## The blogosphere as social space

From the previous section we can see that blogs are more than a space to share stories, an electronic body or your own corner of the Internet. Blogs, and the blogosphere are highly social spaces where the rules and experiences – or habitus – that we take for granted in our physical interactions with others and spaces do apply. This section is a discussion of the blogosphere as a community, and the ways in which we can observe Miller *et al*’s scalable sociality and Bourdieu’s social and cultural capital at work. All of this shows that beyond being a subfield of the Internet and social media, the blogosphere is a social space.

Before moving into the question of the blogosphere – blogging community – as a community, and the ways in which we can observe scalable sociality, and social and cultural capital at work, it would be useful to define those terms. Community will be defined within the section titled, “Is it really a community?”. Scalable sociality was discussed in a previous section in this chapter – “Influencers and scalable sociality” – within which mention was made that at the core of the term are the ways we manage our communication across various social media platforms. The idea of scalability is one of the factors that draws a clear link between Bourdieu, Miller and this research. “Capital, in its objectified or embodied forms, takes time to accumulate,” (Bourdieu, 1986) making the accumulation part of the scale of time: something that holds true for both social and cultural capital.

“Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the *embodied* state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the *objectified* state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc.; and in the *institutionalized* state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because ... it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee. ... Most of the properties of cultural capital can be deduced from the fact that, in its fundamental state, it is linked to the body and presupposes embodiment. The accumulation of cultural capital in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of what is called culture, cultivation, *Bildung*, presupposes a process of embodiment, incorporation, which insofar as it implies a labor of inculcation and assimilation, costs time, time which must be invested personally by the investor. ...it cannot be done at second hand” (Bourdieu, 1986).

So it can be seen that the blog occurs in two forms of cultural capital – objectified and institutionalised – while it is also the electronic body of the blogger that embodies it. It is objectified as it is an artefact of the blogger’s performance (boyd, 2006), which also shows it as a body; a body which embodies it.

Furthermore, the blog illustrates the institutionalised form of cultural capital in that the practice of blogging is established as part of belonging to the field. Again, a practice embodied onto the body – the practices of blogging – is clearly visible in the established near uniformity of form to the blog, shown in the subsections of Blogging 101. And, as the quote above establishes, the work of embodiment costs time personally invested by the blogger. Blogging involves a lot of work, and a lot of work costs time – something discussed further in the next chapter. For the purposes of this section it is sufficient to note that the investment of work and time (compounding into recognition) that the blogger makes is what gives her cultural capital, and that the investment occurs on a scale of time, which relates to the way in which she uses scalable sociality.

The obvious link between scalable sociality and social capital lies in the social. In both instances the social relates back to who you know. In scalable sociality it is about how you manage communication across social media platforms, and in social capital, it lies in your network, or membership of a group.

“Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitled them to credit ... The volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depend on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected. ... The profits which accrue from membership in a group are the basis of the solidarity which makes them possible” (Bourdieu, 1986).

What is interesting in the first lines of this quote is the mention of institutionalised relationships and recognition, and how they tie to membership in a group. If membership in a group is institutionalized, and an institutionalized state is a form of cultural capital, then as suggested by the quote, social capital is the means of measuring one’s relationships, recognition and embodiment of cultural capital. And as with cultural capital, social capital is built over time. It takes time to build relationships, to gain sufficient recognition, and to establish membership in a group. All of these are elements in what makes a community.

### **Is it really a community?**

To establish whether the mommy blogging community really is a community, one has to first define what makes a community. The *SAGE Dictionary of Sociology* (Bruce & Yearly, 2006: 44) mentions that given the highly influential understanding of community by Tönnies, the way community is used as “groups

of people who share common interests, beliefs and values and who may interact only in some mediated way (through the Internet, for example) [is incorrect] when the term ‘voluntary association’ is more appropriate.” And while that is a possibility, it is not the way in which the participants – or I would venture anyone in a community described by Bruce and Yearly as a ‘voluntary association’ – perceive it. This was demonstrated by Participant 6: “Parents are a tribe, and mothers, in particular, have a special bond. Throughout time, we have all faced similar challenges, similar fears, and similar loneliness. But we also get the joy of that unique love we share with our little ones, a love unlike anything else.” Furthermore, this view is supported in some literature: “Digital participation is a *layered* phenomenon: in digital settings, one doesn’t just participate in ‘digital culture’ or ‘life online’; one also participates in a specific conversation, an event or a community, and one adopts the role of ‘user’ of platform X or subscriber of service Y” (Marres, 2017:152).

Something which lies between the influential understanding of community, the way it is used and the consideration of one adopting the role of user of a specific platform, can be found in considering the blog, or rather the South African mommy blogger blogosphere as a third place or site for community gathering (McArthur & White, 2016). McArthur and White, use Oldenburg’s characteristics of a third place and apply it to Twitter. Those characteristics of “third places that inform and provoke community building: (1) neutral ground, (2) leveler, (3) conversation, (4) accessibility and accommodation, (5) regulars, (6) low profile, (7) playful mood, and (8) home away from home” (Oldenburg as cited in McArthur & White, 2016) can with some tweaks be applied to the blogosphere, and in degrees to blogs.

In considering the blogosphere as **neutral ground**, the question becomes one of where it would be possible to say the blogosphere is located. If it is located in the general ether of the Internet, then it would be considered neutral ground, and its neutrality would be confirmed given that the interactions of those in the blogosphere occur on various social media platforms. But, while the ether of the Internet could be considered neutral, the ether runs off servers, and where those servers are located and who might locate them throws a lot of doubt on the idea of the internet as neutral. Those servers provide the platforms that can be accessed by some in limited ways – as discussed in a section of Chapter 2. It is quite clear that if the blog is the electronic body of the blogger, it is not at all possible for the blog to be neutral ground.

There is also the consideration of language – the world is not predominantly Anglophone, but given the construction of what is popular, one could be forgiven for thinking that it is. Thus, the Internet is not neutral ground, and neither is the blog itself. And as the blogosphere is part of the Internet, and uses blogs, it is not neutral ground either.

More tweaking is needed to apply third place sites when looking at the characteristic of **leveler**, as “[a] place that is a leveler is, by its nature, an inclusive place. It is accessible to the general public and does not set formal criteria of membership and exclusion” (Oldenburg as cited in McArthur & White, 2016). One cannot be a mommy blogger if you do not have a child, and you do not blog: that certainly appears to be a formal criterion. But, one needs neither of those to interact with the blogger, her blog and the blogosphere. The blog and blogosphere are spaces accessible to the general public. It could even be ventured that if those spaces were not accessible to the general public then there would be no way for the popular blogger to become popular enough to gain the opportunities which would make her an influencer.

As discussed earlier, no audience means no high states or rates of engagement: factors which would mean no sponsored posts or opportunities with brands. However, the question of who makes up the general public arises: a question that ties back to the issue of neutrality. This brings the discussion back to who has access and how, and where the spaces are located. Although, by tweaking it and focusing on ease of accessibility, the blog and blogosphere could fit. Accessibility is based on the ways in which the ‘general public’ accesses social media platforms – ‘general public’ is troubling, especially when one considers how cost would hamper the ease of access to the internet, something touched on in Chapter 2. Thus, even with a tweak to move emphasis to ease of accessibility, the blogosphere and the blog both fail in being a third space in terms of the leveller characteristic, especially since those spaces, as related to this work, all speak to a specific idea of what group or class would be considered as the ‘general public’.

Application of **conversation** as a characteristic is easily applied to both the blog and blogosphere: “conversation is what attracts people to third places, where they have people they can connect with and share similar interests,” (McArthur & White, 2016) – connection and similar interests being one of the reasons bloggers’ blog. The interesting thing about the conversation is that it is a one-to-many conversation – thus while it does apply, it is not a clean application thereof. With the particular focus on popular bloggers, the conversation is even more diluted, but it does aptly demonstrate scalable sociality. The blog makes the conversation that of one to many, but a one to many conversation with the feel of a one to one; especially when the conversation from the blog post carries on into the comment section and across other social media platforms.

**Accessibility and accommodation** – accommodating “people when they want to be there and welcomes people by allowing them to feel comfortable in that place” (McArthur & White, 2016) – is another easy application for the blog and blogosphere. And accommodating those who want to be there, when they can be/are there is something aided by scalable sociality. This is especially so when one considers how

many engage with popular bloggers – those who engage with her in similar ways would become familiar with each other, and when there are many, it is likely that there will always be someone around. With regulars being based on familiarity with the people and surroundings in the place, there is another check in the column for blogs and the blogosphere being a third place for community building.

Applying **low profile** as a category is slightly trickier. The popular blogger is not going to have a low profile within the community, but given that one could be an observer of the space, it is possible for the blog and blogosphere to meet this characteristic as well.

In order to demonstrate **playful mood** as another check in the column, I present one word – poonami<sup>15</sup>. Playful mood connects regulars and reminds outsiders that they are not part of the group (Oldenburg as cited in McArthur & White, 2016).

**Home away from home** is more challenging to apply, and likely to not be fully applicable – the regularity of appearance of the individual cannot be enforced as it could be at home or work, but if the other characteristics are there, then people will want to be there (Oldenburg as cited in McArthur & White, 2016). Thus, while bloggers do regard their blogs as their corner of the internet and do want to be there, it is not enough to make the space a home away from home.

The question of it really being a community of mommy bloggers goes back to the question of why someone is blogging. Considering the blog and blogosphere as a third place that fosters and builds the community highlights the need articulated by the participants to share their stories, and that personal connections drive the community. The sense of not feeling alone, not being the only one who is “awake at 2 in the morning with a cranky child” (Participant 6). It also highlights that blogging is in part about the blogger having her corner of the internet to think things through – a thinking that is shared and commented on by others sharing their thoughts and stories.

“But while this blog is, in many ways, about her, it’s really about me. It’s about my journey, it’s about my ideas about pregnancy, parenting, motherhood, marriage and whatever else. I love sharing what I’m thinking, mainly because I love seeing what you all respond with. Sometimes my ideas resonate with you, and sometimes they don’t, and it’s just so intriguing to have you with me on this journey” (Participant 6).

The extracts below provide a glimpse of the thoughts on what makes a community that would be more aligned with that in the work of Tönnies: “A small group of people interacted with each other over many

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<sup>15</sup> When an infant’s nappy and clothes are not enough to contain her bowel movements – resulting in poo all over the child and in some cases the parent as well.

years and many separate spheres of life: work, leisure, church, family. Relationships were many-sided, intimate and enduring, and created networks of reciprocal obligation that survived from one generation to the next. The stability and close contacts allowed considerable social cohesion” (Bruce & Yearly, 2006).

“I have also made some **amazing friends** through blogging. Blogging allows you to see directly into the lives of someone else. I have been so fortunate to have met a lot of the women behind the blogs on my blog roll and over the years we have shared some amazing experiences together – there have been births, marriages, successes and failures. We have sat in pews and watched as friends walk down the aisle, we have pushed refresh 100 times waiting for babies to arrive. We have offered advice when babies wouldn’t sleep and we have celebrated birthdays together. We are, in so many ways, family. It is not always easy and there are days I wonder why I still keep doing it but those days are few and far between. Blogging is a part of my life, it is part of who I am. It is the one things I have done that hasn’t failed. It is the one thing, next to my children, that I am most proud of” (Participant 3).

“I have followers who have followed our blog from the start, I have friends all over the world because of blogging ... the joy of that is that whatever time of the day or night there is a friend awake somewhere in the world and good to talk too. I have made so many good friends through blogging, so often they are in the same season and on the same page as I am and there is a connection that you can’t always find elsewhere” (Participant 7).

These extracts above come from participants who have been mommy bloggers for the longest, one for a decade and one just near to a decade, which are most likely why they are the ones who better relate to the understanding of community from Tönnies. They also demonstrate the ways in which the sociality is/was not only scalable in terms of the scales of communication, but also in terms of the involvement that the relationships bring; remembering that the scale of time is also at play. The sheer length of time spent in those relationships allowed for the interaction across various spheres, and developed and cemented the sense of intimacy. And when you include the aspects of the blog and blogosphere serving as a third place, it becomes very clear that we are dealing with a community. A community that changes and grows, yet nevertheless remains the same in in terms of what brings and keeps its members together.

## *4. She works hard for her money: exploring the different ways in which bloggers work*

### **NOT working 9 to 5**

It was a crispy, mostly clear Cape Town winter morning. As we walked from the parked car on a slightly hidden and winding road through the entrance wall, and down the driveway to a beautiful large home with walls of glass, it was clear that this was not the ordinary product launch.

To get to the front entrance of the home we walked down a carefully laid brick path, past large swatches of manicured lawn and carefully tended plants, past a covered pool with long wooden tables set up around it. At the entrance, we were greeted by beautiful young women wearing white dresses with large branding across the front. The look was carefully considered: everything was white and blue. At the entrance was a coat stand, and one of the young woman took our coats and hung them up while we registered our attendance with another woman.

While signing up we were handed a white business card that had the brand's name and logo on the front, and on the back of it the name of the Wi-Fi hotspot along with the password to access it. To the right of the entrance was a large living room. Inside, a mini-stage was set up, and various displays of the product being launched were on coffee tables, side tables and display cases. On the stage was a cream two-seater couch with chairs on either side of it; arranged to create a semi-circle of sorts – creating the impression that the audience were part of something intimate, and not there to learn more about a product. Behind the couch was a large display cabinet, and some trinkets could be seen, but for the most part the display was obscured from view by a large screen with the brand's logo projected onto it, in blue on a white background. Aside from the product displays in the room, the mini-stage and screen, there were also two tall camera stands with large professional grade cameras on them, operated by two of the rather small number of men attending the event. There was, besides the five-month-old baby attending with his mother, one other male attendee – and he was there on behalf of his wife, who was unable to attend.

To the left of the entrance you would walk into a large kitchen – another room with shades of white and blue, which was only broken by the silver of the large fridge, the wooden sliding doors that led to another



room, and the pops of colour coming from the coffee makers, and boxes of teas. Once in the kitchen, you could go to a smaller, more intimate room to the right – a family lounge/study also in shades of blue. To the left was a dining nook. That nook, as in the lounge, had a wall that was almost entirely glass – large windows, letting in the light and views of lush, green farmland – a peaceful moment amongst the noise of city living. Displayed on the walls were framed sayings, and letters from moms to moms. The scene was masterfully set: we were in the ‘home’ of the product (a home that some might already have, some might aspire to, but nevertheless a space that had all the hallmarks of a home), the home of a family that shared space and moments.

And just like with a home, there was a room where you could play, only in this instance, the play area was a room staged to demonstrate the use of the products, and those who got to play were members of the product’s research and development team. Those ladies asked members of the audience to be part of the demonstrations. And once the presentation was done, you were invited to go and ‘play’ in the space as well. Here, though, the ‘play’ you were invited to do was part of the product demonstration, and to allow for the bloggers to take photos of the space and products to share with their readers, and across social media.

The experience of the event, and the way it was carefully constructed to give off the air of going into the brand’s home, echoes the way blogging – for the more popular blogger – also becomes a carefully constructed experience. Or, as we saw in the previous chapter, “[b]ehind every carefully written blog post, every carefully edited video and every filtered Instagram image, was a lot of time, effort, thought and work. Yes work” (Participant 2).

While it may seem odd to be talking about an event when talking about bloggers, it is far from odd. Attending events, being offered products for review, and receiving payment for writing a post are all part and parcel of what happens to a blogger once she becomes popular, or rather, is deemed to be an influencer. “Influencer marketing is really no different than word-of-mouth marketing. It just so happens to be taking place in a digital space ... influencers tell the story of a brand” (Kombol as cited in Pophal, 2016:20). Popular bloggers have word-of-mouth power that brands want. Therefore, they are invited to events, given items to review, and most importantly for this work, paid to do so.

The interesting thing is that none of the participants started their blog with the intent to become paid for anything. It became a by-product of the time and work invested in sharing that amounted to the compensation; moving beyond feeling heard and part of a community to that of economic compensation.



Unlike a steady job, when one works regular hours for a company and are compensated with a salary, when blogging the hours and compensation are not set at all. The participants reported working on their blogs – and all of the various associated activities that form part of it – for a minimum of ten to a maximum of forty hours a week. These hours are over and above the time given to employment, family, and the many other things that we spend our time on. It may be argued that this is the price they opted to pay when pursuing blogging, but none of my participants initially started blogging in order to gain anything from it other than having a space to share what they were going through.

It is a cost of time that affects the lives of the participants far beyond that:

“Because I work full time, I have to plan when I can write and create. Weekends are planned around the following week's content calendar. If I have paid for content, then sorry friends and family, that has to take precedence over a braai or fun outing. ...So my weekends are planned around my content calendar, every spare minute over the weekend is spent working on my blog. ...And if I can't get everything done over the weekend then guess what time I blog during the week? At 5am! My husband thinks I'm crazy but I've on occasion, gotten up at 4am to finish a piece of content that was on deadline. So, there's a cost involved there, my time is valuable, I have to manage it carefully and it does mean foregoing fun in order to meet deadlines. Again, I love it, but there is a sacrifice involved. ...There are so many costs involved, so let's start with the obvious ones, like buying your own domain, which is renewed annually and your web hosting and data costs for photo and video uploads. Then there are all the paid for themes for your website, which are purchased in dollars. ... If you're hoping to be taken seriously by PR agencies and brands, a wordpress.com with a free theme is just not going to cut it. ...I haven't even touched on the emotional and physical costs of blogging. Opening yourself up to veritable strangers isn't always easy. Some of what I share is hard and emotional, but I do it because I love it and because I want to touch and inspire others. ... It's not easy, I have to keep reminding myself not to compare myself to others, to remain authentically me, because this blogging thing can wreak havoc on your self-esteem” (Participant 2).

The cost of blogging is not just borne by the popular blogger now turned influencer, but by her family and friends as well. A cost that is clearly paid in terms of time and money. In the extract above the blogger very clearly details how the time given to blogging goes beyond writing the posts. She also details the monetary cost, while hinting at the emotional one. The monetary costs are also an indication of the time cost – after all to have money to spend she had to work for it, selling her labour/her time for a wage. Additionally, as with the event that opened this chapter, event attendance requires the time to be able to attend it.

While to those outside of the popular blogging field attending an event such as the one mentioned seems to be something that the blogger gets to do for fun and is given products as leaving for free, those products

are not free. The event itself was work for the blogger – beyond the arranging of her day to ensure there was time to travel to and from the event, and the time to be at the event – there was an expectation from the brand and the marketing company that had arranged the event that those who attended would be a worthwhile return on the investment for them: a return that was expected to start happening from the start of the event. This was made clear by ensuring that all who attended had the Wi-Fi password, and knew the hashtag to use for the event across their social media platforms. The taking of photographs and live tweeting of the event was all encouraged, along with the understanding that attendance of the event plus a hamper of products would warrant a blog post, and at least one mention of the event and brand on the participants' various social media platforms.

I can safely say this, as during the course of the first presentation all were encouraged to do an activity, and then share that activity to Twitter with the event hashtag. The understanding that there would be a blog post about the event and product comes from the understanding that one is invited to an event based on what a marketer sees as something that speaks to your, and your audience's, interest. Not to forget that it would be a break in etiquette to attend an event, receive products worth a few hundred rand and not mention it at all.

The event also aptly demonstrated the social and cultural capital that one of the participants to this study has. My relationship with her enabled my attendance – so her social capital resulted in the assistance that she gave the marketing company, translating into her being able to add names to the event list. She kindly included my name on the list, enabling another dimension to the work for this study, but also allowing me to thank four of the participants for their time face-to-face. Her assistance to the marketing company ensured that they finally got definitive responses to their event invitation from those they had identified as the influencers they wanted there, while she also exposed them to others who would be a great fit for the brand the event was being held for. This particular participant has a small business that focuses on introducing brands to the right influencer for them, creating a natural fit and extension of the influencer's brand.

## **The work of blogging**

It is worth repeating that the participants all reported putting in a minimum of ten hours a week on their blogs, with some spending as many as forty. That clearly takes blogging from something just for sharing, community and creativity, to that of work, more so when one considers the various platforms that are

used to engage with their audiences – which is more and more seen as something that must be done in order to not only give different views of your story, but also a way to maintain a sense of authenticity.

The more obvious way in which blogging can be seen as work, is when we consider that, “[a]n increasing number of bloggers are seeing their blogging as a profession. Bloggers who are able to make a living from individually run blogs usually either have a strong personal brand built up over years, or they very carefully seek niche markets to blog about, where advertisements and affiliate programs that match the products they discuss will pay well” (Rettberg, 2008:132). Rettberg’s view could be seen (especially, by the bloggers, and those who know them) as a cynical one, but it does appear to speak to the truth at the heart of the matter, especially if applying that view to the extract below from Participant 9.

“There’s a tendency to look at bloggers, the freebies they get, the experiences they get to enjoy, and think: oh well it’s nice for some. The amount of times that well-meaning people have said to me “Oh I think I need to start a blog!”, as a response to something I got to do or enjoy. And on hearing that comment I always think: Yes do! Please start a blog. I’d like you to start one and then see how much work it takes to keep posting on it, week after week, year after year, and how much money it actually takes to make it look nice, and how much effort it takes to spread the word, just so you can bring readers to your little online space. ...Everything you get sent or get to do has a price, and that price is your time. Time, you are giving up spending with your family, or out of your leisure time, that then gets taken up by this blog. ... The truth is also that many of us bloggers have been writing for a good few years, before we started receiving any kind of financial or physical reward. We’ve been tap tapping away on this keyboard late into the night as you’ve been relaxing or reading or watching TV, offering free content generously to our readers, with no reward in sight. It turns out that a blog is an asset, just like a business, and we’ve been pouring in time building that asset for YEARS” (Participant 9).

Here we see that the success of a blog comes from the unrecognised work that a blogger puts into her blog. It is indeed a profession on the side of their day-to-day job – and the job pays the bills and enables investment into blogging. There are exceptions to the years of hard work, and they are not from those who carefully seek out a niche to blog about with strong affiliate programmes – at least not in the South African mommy blogosphere. South Africa does not yet make use of those programmes. For those bloggers where success seems to have come easily, there is also work, but also a sense of the right person sharing the right story at the right time. But just as easily as a relatively new blogger can be seen as a popular blogger, so too can that popularity be lost, so for a popular blogger to have real influence from her social and cultural capital, work is needed to both build and maintain those. Thus, while there is a love of blogging and the affirmation that comes with it – affirmation in the form of comments, likes and

opportunities – it is work, if taken seriously. Taking it seriously makes visible to the blogger the invisible labour that goes into making technology work.

“Sociologists and anthropologists of technology have directed attention to the ‘invisible labour’ that users perform in order to make technology ‘work’ in society” (Leigh Star and Strauss, 1999; Wajcman, 1991 as cited in Marres, 2017:149). The invisible labour being referred to comes from the processes of what makes a successful post, tweet, image and the like come into being. There is a lot of time and work invested in constructing a post to be ‘just right’, to write it well, and to find the right image that you can use. The image should be yours or from a site that allows use of their images to avoid any copyright issues, while you need to also ensure that the image has not been used recently by yourself or someone else.

There is work in bringing attention to the post, work performed across other social media channels – the tweet needs to be constructed well enough to get a click through without being obvious clickbait<sup>16</sup>, it also needs to be repeated often enough to make sure it is seen by the right people while not flooding timelines with the same tweet over and over. The share to Instagram needs to have the perfect hashtags to attract not just your followers’ attention, but to allow for it to gain traction and thus more views and shares on the platform. The share to Facebook needs to be just different enough to the share on Twitter and Instagram so that those who are on all three platforms do not feel overwhelmed with the message that you have a new post. And most importantly, across all of the platforms, the way you share must be constructed in a manner to ensure your authenticity, style and brand, and not come off as a desperate cry for attention. All in all, it is an intensive, draining work experience considered by those who are not part of the sphere as ‘just something anyone can do well’ while it clearly it is not.

Understandably all of that work can lead to blogging fatigue, where the blogger is no longer able to brush past all of the work that goes into it. Sometimes the blogger pushes through with the intent to maintain regular posting, so as not to undo all of the work that went into building her audience. When that occurs it can have the effect that Participant 7 mentions. “I absolutely love blogging, but the reality is that sometimes it just feels like work. I sense that our readers know when I am blogging because I feel I just must, vs when I am blogging from the heart. So, when life is overwhelming I take a break and don’t post

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<sup>16</sup> “Something (such as a headline) designed to make readers want to click on a hyperlink especially when the link leads to content of dubious value or interest” (Merriam-Webster.com, 2017).

... I would rather have fewer good posts, than multiple mediocre posts. So yes, it is work, hard work ... but work I love, so it doesn't feel like work" (Participant 7).

For Participant 8 blogging used to feel like work, but "when [she] stopped caring about free stuff and traffic and just using it to document things and advocate mental health it got better". Audience views – traffic – can become a double-edged sword. The desire to share your story for others to not feel alone is obviously helped a great deal when more read your story, but with that attention from readers comes attention from marketers and brands. It becomes an act of balancing your needs and wants from blogging, with what everyone else expects to come from it. But that balance, especially when factoring in that working with brands often means extra income, becomes much harder to do.

"I think there is a range of working with brands. I don't do many direct sponsored posts, as in being briefed and writing. I mostly do reviews and giveaways, and only of things [child] and I experience ourselves. I do charge but it is an admin fee, for the time, photos, social media management, winner draw, etc and I include a FB boost cost in all quotes now too. BUT I also include that if I don't like the product I'm not going to review it unless it is a danger to others. My job isn't to share every brand experience I have, it is to share the things I love and believe make my life easier - even if it's just a toy that keeps [child] happy. I am very honest with the brands I work with on that. Although I share a social media post whenever we get a media drop, it has to be something special for me to engage with it further. I guess that way it doesn't really affect the way I blog because I filter before it gets that far" (Participant 1).

The quote above shows the way in which Participant 1 attempts to make the balance work. And for all intents and purposes it should work. But there is always the consideration to keep in mind that the way we want something to work does not always work in that way, especially, when the social and cultural capital that is transubstantiated into material gain is reliant on balancing one's needs as a blogger with the needs and desires of readers and brands.

### **Influencers: bloggers with social and cultural capital**

This section use the way Participant 11 works with her blog as an extended example, to demonstrate how bloggers use their social and cultural capital as influencers and transubstantiate that into material gain. Participant 11 is arguably the most successful blogger of all of the participants – and while she may not hold mommy blogger of the year titles as some of the participants do, that is more a result of her not taking part in those competitions rather than a reflection of the sheer amount of work and engagement she puts into her blog. As mentioned previously, it is engagement that serves as a distinction between merely being a popular blogger versus being an influencer. Both the popular blogger and influencer

require forms of symbolic capital to enable the blogger to gain opportunities and to transubstantiate that capital into a material gain.

Participant 11's use of those capitals turned into the creation of opportunities that allowed both her and her husband to fully commit to diving into the world of start-ups. While on the surface that may not seem impressive, consideration must be given to the fact that in the South African market it is very, very rare for one to be able to have a steady, reliable and sufficient income solely from blogging work. More often than not those who make their income from blogging tend to be involved in the precarious freelance industry, or have built up savings, or have a partner with a sufficient income to cover lean income months for the blogger, or most likely a combination of all three. This makes the success and opportunities of Participant 11 more remarkable, as her gain enabled her husband to make the leap from steady reliable income to that of freelancer and driver of start-ups. The success of Participant 11 is made more interesting for this work when considering the manner in which she has created those opportunities. She is very open about not always charging the brands she works with – something which has led to tensions between her and some other blogosphere members, as they feel by doing so she is hurting all who wish to make income off their blogs. What is interesting is that those most vocal about it are not mommy bloggers, who then lay the blame for their inability to transubstantiate what social capital they have into material gain at the foot of mommy bloggers.

This makes Participant 11 someone who acts on the exceptions to the rules of popular blogging/influencer marketing: an exception that she is well aware of and has commented on. For her the key to her success lies in foregrounding her relationship with her readers. She will champion for them by not only being open with them about the brands she works with and why – a deep belief and love for the product – but she will also go to battle with brands for her readers. These battles occur when she follows up with them on their experiences with the brand – something which occurs when they win a product or experience from the brand on a giveaway she ran – as to why the reader was not given the same product/experience/treatment from the brand that she received. The centring of her relationships with her readers may to the cynical read as nothing but the workings of an incredibly savvy person in making sure she maintains her success by keeping those who made it possible happy, but it is not so. It is rather an example of someone making sure that the community she is part of is given the best that it can receive. Or at least that is the consideration given to it by those who fall part of that community.

## The work of friendship and community for bloggers

Participant 7 wrote a humour-filled post detailing the ten types of mommies found in every mommy forum, and while it focuses on mommy forums, those categories can apply to blogs as well. However, what is key from her post is not the ten categories themselves, but rather one of her postscripts:

“As much as the above would lead you to believing I hate the mommy groups, I don’t. These forums have helped me immensely. I’ve sat at 1am with other moms going through a rough period and have felt part of a tribe, part of something unique and special and have felt so grateful to have found a place where I belong, where I am one of the girls, etc. I don’t hate mommy groups, promise. But like all things in life, there’s a bit of sour in between all the sweet” (Participant 7).

Participant 6 took part in a gaming event, and wrote about how it made her a role model: “This was being a role model for other moms. The next time those moms wonder if they can go to an event, they might just remember me. They might just bring their little ones along instead of being afraid to leave the house. For one of those moms, I might just be like that Italian parliamentarian<sup>17</sup>, proving that it can be done” (Participant 6). Here we have a blogger considering how her actions, coupled with the social capital she has, can serve as an influence for others. It also hints at aspects of community, in that by displaying her ‘normal’ to the world she is normalising something for those who may not have considered it normal. And besides being part of the mommy blogger community, the blogger is showing her involvement in other communities as well – that it is possible for one to be a mother and a gamer, something some would have you believe is not possible.

The extracts below demonstrate not only the work that goes into blogging – and that of being an influencer – they also demonstrate that social media platforms do not operate in isolation. All the platforms work together to create a cohesion across them – demonstrating Miller and Madianou’s (as cited in Miller *et al* 2016:4) idea of polymedia – no social media platform operates in isolation, nor can it be understood in isolation as the use and meaning of each platform is relative to the others. The use of different platforms allows for greater management over the mode of communication chosen and the ways in which it is scaled. In the first extract of the three following this paragraph, Participant 5 mentions how she had very few views on her post as she did not follow her usual process of cross posting it to Facebook. Essentially, she wrote her blog post, but did not take the time to share the post – as a form of communication – to the platform she knows will make the blog post one-to-many sharing, thereby raising her scale of sociality. She further mentions actively compensating for her readers who do not use feed

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<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/24/high-five-lucia-ronzulli-children-workplace>



readers. The second and third extracts also demonstrate an awareness of readers interacting with the blogger, while the second one shows the deep sense of investment and intimacy in others and their lives. Participant 10 is stressing just how important the sharing of experiences can be, and in saying she wants to share about the little things too she is demonstrating the manners in which polymedia and how it allows for the cohesion of scale of sociality, create not only a sense of community and friendship, but that of being heard and recognised, illustrating how social capital is intertwined with scalable sociality.

“I’m on most social channels (Insta, Twitter, [Facebook], Snapchat, pinterest, pokemon 😊😊) it’s absolutely pivotal to the success of my blog. Yesterday I forgot to post my new post to Facebook until late afternoon and my views were basically nothing until I did. It’s how people follow along. Hardly anyone has a blog reader anymore. In terms of how I use sm it varies. I’m always partial to one channel, sometimes it’s twitter and sometimes it insta. It really just depends on my mood” (Participant 5).

“I don’t claim to have all the answers. I don’t see myself as the mother of all solutions to all the worlds problems. I don’t think that reading my blog is going to solve all of your problems either. What I do want, is to share my experiences with other people because maybe, just maybe, it will make one other person feel less alone. ...So that’s why I write. That’s the reason I work so hard at this blogging thing. I want to be part of your life and your stories and I want you to know that it’s okay to hurt. It’s okay to be so fucking confused about life and everything that goes on in it but know that you are not alone. We’ve gone through it too. We all go through those times and we all feel alone but we don’t have to. I want to share the successes and the wins and the little stories about when those things happened, good things happened too. Somewhere on the other side of sadness, there is so much happiness” (Participant 10).

“Somedays [social media] feels like walking around a dark room in a stranger’s house with a blindfold on. I use FB, twitter and Instagram mainly - I struggle to keep up with snapchat and Pinterest regularly. I think it is important- it’s a great way to interact with your readers. Maybe I want to find out suggestions on dummies but don’t want a whole post. It also helps people to get to know you a bit better” (Participant 3).

## **Manufactured authenticity?**

“There is a performance aspect to social networking sites that is also present in blogs, though it may be a little more subtle in the latter. When we blog or use social networking sites, we not only present ourselves as individuals, we also publicly proclaim our relationships” (Rettberg, 2008:76).

At the time of writing there was a sudden rash of posts being shared in the mommy blogosphere where bloggers were talking about the need to share imperfect parenting, as too often there is a notion of perfect parenting which we become caught up in. The very notion of imperfect parenting and needing to show it



speaks to the way modern motherhood is becoming an act done under an ever-watchful eye. Or rather it speaks to the ‘new momism’ that Douglas and Michaels (2004) speak about.

“New momism” [is] the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children. The ‘new momism’ is a highly romanticized and yet demanding view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet. [It] is a set of ideals, norms, and practices, most frequently and powerfully represented in the media, that seem on the surface to celebrate motherhood, but which in reality promulgate standards of perfection that are beyond your reach” (Douglas & Michaels, 2004: 4-5).

I repeat this quote as it is key in understanding the view on motherhood that seems to prevail. Taking the thought of ‘new momism’ further, one could view the bloggers as taking action to act against the watchful eye, the standards of ideals and perfection that no one could ever reach, but are told to aspire to. It is quite fascinating to watch as the constant unease of stretching for sheer perfection is being spoken against, yet at the same time it pulls on a performance I view as manufactured authenticity. In performing their multiple identities in this odd digital space of public-private, the bloggers are always constructing views of themselves for others to consume and interact with. There is no one true sense of self, thus there is no one true representation of yourself. It is just not possible.

Within different social settings we bring forth different behaviours, and identities of ourselves, an aspect that is brought even more to the fore when the act of blogging – and all that is associated with it – comes to the reader/audience after careful conscious consideration, planning and presentation by the blogger. The conscious nature of the act is key here, especially as it would appear that the blogger would rather not have the reader/audience aware of it. After all, if it is all a careful consideration, what does that mean for the relationship you have forged with her? Again Participant 2s, “[b]ehind every carefully written blog post, every carefully edited video and every filtered Instagram image, was a lot of time, effort, thought and work. Yes work” applies.

And at times bloggers are aware of the duality of the nature of weighing up what is or is not shared.

“Really? You got that from reading my blog? You’ve never met me, met my children, been to my home or seen my interaction between my children and I? You know less than 1% about me and my children. But yet, you are a reader with “no vested interest” who felt it was necessary to point this out to me?” (Participant 2).

The quote above is from a post in which the blogger was responding to a comment from a reader that she showed favouritism of one child over another. It is interesting to note that although the blogger has made

herself, her life and experiences open to all by virtue of sharing across social media, she believes that an active reader would know less than one percent about her and her children. Which leaves one wondering: is that really so? An active reader – or as was mentioned in the post that this reader was new to the blog – tends to lurk<sup>18</sup> on the blog before taking the step of commenting. Additionally, it would not be a once-off reader who would a comment about favouritism: it would be someone who had read a number of posts. Quite possibly the person might have even tracked certain story lines across multiple posts by the blogger. I say this not just as a reader of blogs, but also because often when readers are new to a blog and they explore the ‘About’ section they are guided to certain posts to read. That guidance could be from a list of posts key to the blogger’s story, or their top posts featured on the blog or even just by browsing a category of posts that interests them. This sense of a larger story, or narrative, is articulated by Rettberg (2008:115):

“When blogs tell stories, they generally do so in an episodic form, with each post being a self-contained unit that contributes an overall narrative. Each post makes sense in itself, but read together – not necessarily in sequence – the posts tell a larger story. That story is usually partial and incomplete, and does not form a narrative whole as well-formed stories in mainstream literature and cinema do. Instead, the overall story as gleaned from reading a blog is likely to be pieced together from fragments, perhaps supplemented by bits of stories from other places.”

Here, the reader found a narrative, or rather a story that she read as clearly indicating the blogger was showing favouritism. Again, I point to readers often being lurkers before they comment – something that is easily observed by post statistics. One can have hundreds of views on a post with very few, if any, comments on it. Commenting is a process that moves the reader from passive, occasional observer of a life to one who takes a more active role in the observation. And much as Rettberg states the overall story is put together from pieces elsewhere – the blog is but the starting point for starting the story.

“Micro patronage and ads surround the blog but can, in theory, leave the posts and the blogger’s integrity intact. When actual blog posts are sponsored, questions of trust and integrity arise” (Rettberg, 2008:137). The questions of trust and integrity are but one aspect of manufactured authenticity, especially when one considers that often bloggers, and in particular, popular bloggers, are at great pains to stress to readers that they are who they “say” they are. It is something that bloggers grapple with, as seen in a 2014 post by one participant stressing that honesty is not the same as authenticity. It raises the question of why is

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18 “[T]o read messages on an Internet discussion forum (such as a newsgroup or chat room) without contributing” (Merriam-Webster.com, 2017).

this so important. I posit three possible reasons for this; alienation, scalable sociality, and something that lies in-between.

Key to understanding the alienation which occurs to between the blogger and her blog as work, per Marx can be seen in:

“The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object. Hence, the greater this activity, the greater is the worker’s lack of object. Whatever the product of his labour is, he is not. Therefore the greater this product, the less is he himself. The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as confronting him; it means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien” (Tucker, 1978:72).

The blogger puts her life into her blog, and before she attains status as a popular blogger the blog still belongs to her – the space and what is shared on it is controlled by her likes and desires. But once she reaches popular status – or likely before that, if she is driven to build up reader stats and engagement – the object that is her blog is no longer hers, yet she must still work at it. And she must work at it constantly if, as participants have stated, they put anything between a minimum of ten to a maximum of forty hours a week into their blog and its associated activities. When this happens, it is no longer just a space/object to share and create.

While the blog still functions as the blogger’s electronic body, here it becomes more and more the shape/thought of the body as the sense-making organ she uses to make sense of and interact with the blog. With this move of the blog being less of her body, and more functioning as a sense-making body/organ it further exemplifies the blog as an institutionalised form of cultural capital. Further, once giveaways and sponsored content start up, the blog becomes removed from being her electronic form. Instead, it becomes an object external to her, and functions as something which is an institutionalized and embodied form of new momism as part of cultural capital.

Thus, the blogger first becomes alienated from the work as being something for herself, then she becomes alienated from the object of her labour – most clearly demonstrated in sponsored posts, and the way in which her audience engages with the space. And the success of all her work leads to alienation from others – as shown in the way in which popular bloggers become each other’s competitors for the limited opportunities to work with brands.

“And I got swept up in the competitiveness of it all. I suddenly became aware of how important my “brand identity” was and as a result I began to censor myself. I stopped

sharing openly and without regard about my life and suddenly had to think about every detail of every photo, tweet or Facebook post I made. I became aware that brands were watching us and hand picking us based on who they felt fitted in with them. They didn't want to engage with swears, wine swilling mom's (I don't even lie, an industry inside shared with me once that some parenting brands for eg, check out the timelines of their potential influencers and will not work with them if they tweet for example about drinking wine) And I felt myself losing my soul, trapped by the feelings of intense competition and that sucked the fun and the joy out of blogging for me. I stopped sharing authentically and started sharing what I thought would appeal to a select few and in the process, I feel like I lost my soul. Every move I made online was strategic and with a limited audience in mind" (Participant 2).

Finally, she becomes alienated from herself – something aptly demonstrated in the way the blogger starts sharing less, writes fewer and fewer posts, and admits to her audience of just being tired of it and starts questioning why she continues to blog – she is no longer blogging for herself. The answer lying in alienation though, is only one that can be mostly easily observed in the popular blogger. It may occur in some form with all bloggers, especially as all are writing with a perceived audience in mind, but there are fewer material, social and cultural consequences related to it for the blogger who is not popular.

The idea of the blog being an institutionalised and embodied form of new momism as cultural capital, becomes apparent in the consideration of blogging as work, and it being work that the worker is alienated from. The very notion of new momism operates as an alienation of the mother from the act of parenting thanks to the demands placed on the mother, demands she can never fully meet, despite how much work and time she invests in it, not to forget that the ideals new momism falls prey to are all related to a very particular type of motherhood. This is a type of new motherhood that by the way it is constructed, puts it out of the reach of most, thereby making it alien.

When considering manufactured authenticity in terms of scalable sociality, it is important to consider the way the bloggers use different social media platforms. This is important as it not only illustrates how the blogger performs differently across them, but also illustrates Miller and Madianou's (as cited in Miller *et al* 2016:4) idea of polymedia – no social media platform operates in isolation, nor can it be understood in isolation, as the use and meaning of each platform is relative to the others. In considering this option care will be taken in exploring the manner in which the different social media platforms used by the blogger are used in scaling her sociality, and how this ties into the observation of manufactured authenticity.

As stated in Chapter 3, scalable sociality specifically came from an observation made by Miller *et al*'s (2016) work in the two key scales that social media platforms engage on.

“The concept of scalable sociality really grew in our previous work on polymedia. On the issue of polymedia, we argue that instead of treating each media separately we needed to realize this was an ecology of a series of new media, all of it coming on stream together; and what that meant was could start choosing: with this kind of discussion we could use email, but for this we needed Skype. ... It became a mechanism, which meant you can choose your media out of all the different media, but of course you are judged on which media you picked. Why didn't you contact me with voice when I wanted to speak to you? So, that was polymedia. ... We started to realize there was a generalized pattern to what was going on, in that prior to social media on the whole, and there are always exceptions, but on the whole historically you had two kinds of media. You had dyadic private media and that's basically a one to one. Then you had public broadcast unlimited audiences, but you had no control over them. The first social media, what used to be called social network sites, like Facebook and Myspace, were scaling down from public broadcasting, so you're broadcasting, but maybe to a couple of hundred people rather than just anybody, and you could control that. More recently you have WeChat and WhatsApp that are coming from messenger services, but scaling up, like Snapchat. And they tend to be groups of 20, 30, more trusted, more intimate, but not one to one. They are genuinely groups. This is not simply an ego-centred network... They are genuinely group based, in other words a WhatsApp message can come from anybody to anybody within that group. So they're not the decline of groups, they're the reinforcement in some ways of groups. Could be family or friends or whatever it is. Now, you put those two things together and as new platforms develop, they start to occupy the niches along the spectrum. So now whereas once you had either the extreme of dyadic, private, two people or the extreme of public broadcast and absolutely anybody, now you have a scale. And that scale goes from little groups, Snapchat going to 12 people, closest friends; WhatsApp going to maybe 25 people; Facebook going to maybe a couple hundred people; to Twitter going to a couple thousand people. You have a genuine scale and that includes both the size of the group and the degree of privacy you choose as appropriate to any particular message. We argue, putting these all together as polymedia, you end up with something we would call scalable sociality. You can choose the scale of the sociality that you want for any particular genre of communication” (Borgerson & Miller, 2016).

The quote above, from an interview, is extensive, but it aptly demonstrates the scales at play. The key here is locating just where blogs fall on the scale, given the line they straddle between the dyadic of private communication and broadcasting to the public. The question of where on the public private line a social media platform falls applies to all of the platforms, and it demonstrates points made in Miller *et al's* (2016) book that the line does not matter, what matters is how it used.

Thus, with a blog, when the blogger first starts she is clearly working with smaller groups. And it remains small, intimate groups as she builds up her audience and works at actively sharing her posts to find an audience. That process of sharing her blog, finding an audience, and finding those who can relate, starts the process of changing the scale – moving it out to bigger groups with less intimacy. Yet, that initial sense of intimacy, belonging, finding your people does not disappear as the group grows. While it is clear

that the degree of privacy must change as the group grows, it is not always clear to the blogger that the initial intimacy is no longer there. While her readers are still afforded the same views of her life as before, she no longer gets that intimacy from her readers. It is just not possible for her to manage the work that goes into maintaining those relationships, especially when one considers that popular bloggers will have thousands of followers across the various social media platforms they are on.

Thus, while at first it was possible for the blogger to read the blogs, and/or follow the Twitter/Instagram/Snapchat accounts of those who interacted with her on those platforms, it becomes something that is more and more difficult to do as the size of the group grows. It shifts the scale of communication from one that allowed for one-to-one, seen by many on the platform, to one that focuses more on one-to-many, seen by many. The very nature of fast-paced changes and updates on platforms makes it increasingly difficult to see most of what is shared by others, leaving one to only glancing at snippets of conversations and shared moments. It was most likely initially something that was hard to do at that point, but it had to be done to find more to read/hear/see her story. And as the work in maintaining those relationship grows for the blogger, it remains the same for her readers, and it is precisely that which the readers notice and comment on.

The change in the relationship, where the reader and blogger go from being each other's people/tribe to the blogger no longer being part of it due to her change in status, leads to readers questioning the blogger's authenticity, and the blogger feeling the need to insist that she is the same person. Additionally, the way in which the blogger uses other social media platforms changes as well. This was something highlighted in the focus group and interviews with the participants. They found themselves limiting themselves to only those platforms that were better fit for them – some said there were just too many platforms to be on all well. They also adapted the way they used those platforms they chose to be on.

One of the more interesting observations of this adaption comes from the way in which some of the social media platforms interact with each other. Thus, while initially Participant 1 was highly active on Twitter, mentioning that it served to further foster a lot of the friendships she made from blogging, her use of the platform changed as the time available to her changed; which was coupled with her sense of the feel of the platform changing. The implication was that she would rather have left the platform, but that given the number of followers she had there the next best option was to amend her use. Thus, a new blog post, Instagram photo and Facebook share now gets an automatic tweet generated with a link to the new content. This amendment drew greatly on the platform allowing for content to be shared there automatically from the other platforms, provided the correct apps and permissions were used.



But with that amendment of use came a change in the scale of sociality on that platform. Twitter went from a space that created and strengthened ties on a scale of one-to-one communication or one-to-few communication, to more often than not acting only as a space for one-to-many broadcasting.

Participant 1 was not the only participant to amend her use of certain platforms. A common experience was for a participant to try a new platform, find that it was not for her audience while it was for her, and then to remain on that platform to indulge in something purely for fun. The sense of indulging just for fun, highlights the act of blogging and other acts associated to it as one of work – something discussed further in the section on motherhood and work.

It might seem odd to say that the final answer lies somewhere between Miller and Marx, especially as Miller has said:

“From Durkheim, to Mauss, to Marx to Weber we have a grand narrative of social sciences which claims everything leads toward this break-up of traditional group formations into increasing individuality. All our evidence suggests this is not true on social media. Social media amongst other things enables people to ameliorate the negative consequences of other aspects of modernity, inasmuch as families who are now split transnationally or at least in different urban areas, which is the norm, can be back in contact. They become more viable again as families” (Borgerson & Miller, 2016).

Yet, the way in which things have played out leave me with the view that the answer does indeed lie between the two ideas. Miller, in his interview with Borgerson, puts it as:

“There is a geographical break-up. Social media has clearly been used as a response to that, to allow people to not just communicate but actually to live together. I mean, couples who are now working in different places, I think in a very genuine sense live together online. They see as much of each other sometimes online, through Skype and other forms, as much as they did when they were living together in the same place” (Borgerson & Miller, 2016).

One aspect to this third option lies in the extract below – the participant states that honesty is not the same as authenticity. She puts that she:

“... actually noticed it happening to a few bloggers I respect, they are so focused on blogging **right** that they have forgotten their authenticity. *It is possible to blog honestly without being authentic.* I could blog every day, possibly twice a day, with posts like ‘7 tips to stop sibling fighting’ or ‘5 ways to cook dinner with a baby on your hip and glass of wine in your hand’ or ‘Surviving parents evening in 9 simple steps’. All of the posts would be honest, they would be me offering honest advice while checking all the blocks I need for a clickable headline and creating content the masses (and I say this with the utmost respect for the masses) want to read. What the posts wouldn’t be

though is authentic to **ME**. They wouldn't be what I wanted to write about (except maybe for the cooking with baby on hip and wine in hand), they would be written purely to boost my stats and get the clicks which isn't why I blog and it's not why I want people to come here. Of course, I want the high stats, I want the clicks and I would love people to share my posts, retweet them and leave lots of comments. *Are those stats worth selling my soul for? Are they worth losing my authenticity for? What will happen if I do sell my soul? Who will I be selling it to?* ... I wish I was at the point where my blog earned income that stretched more than buying sushi for lunch once a month, hopefully I will get there one day. But I worry that it will come at the cost of my authenticity" (Participant 3).

Thus, while the blogger may feel that she is maintaining her authenticity by being honest with her readers, they don't always see it that way. The thought of blogging the 'right' way starts to stand in the way of the blogger acting in the way which her readers came to know her. And while change is natural, especially when you have been doing something for years, if the change seems too sudden to others, the question of authenticity arises. It arises because, given the intimacy that may have been felt in the way in which the reader and blogger connected and engaged across social media platforms, it allowed for a sense of 'living' together online, creating the false impression that the reader knows the blogger. So for the reader the thing that makes the most sense in attempting to understand the change in the blogger is that she is no longer authentic, while this sensed change comes from the blogger both being alienated from her blog and its content, and the way in which the blogger changed the scales of sociality across platforms. It becomes a way for the reader to attempt to answer the question of how something "so closely linked to the person, [can] be bought without buying the person and so losing the very effect of legitimation which presupposes the dissimulation of dependence?" (Bourdieu, 1986).

## **Motherhood and work**

To better understand how motherhood is work and what goes into it, a discussion of the way motherhood is seen and constructed by the participants, and others, is needed.

Across various dictionaries we see motherhood defined as the act of mothering, with mothering and motherhood both coming from mother the female parent. Thus, we are left with considering motherhood as the way in which the female parent parents, but we know from experience of performing a parenting role or being parented, that this is not all there is. While there are various ways to parent, the consistent factor to it includes the act of loving, caring and providing for your child. And while that may be considered as enough, it does not show the way in which those acts of loving, caring and providing are performed and constructed to include a multitude of actions, both small and large. It is in fact the act of



construction and performing the small and large actions of motherhood that makes motherhood work and sets a stage not only for the ‘new momism’ Douglas and Michael (2004) talk about, but also the so-called ‘mommy wars’ that are seemingly never ending.

All thirteen participants stated in various forms that motherhood is an all-encompassing love, an overwhelming sense of responsibility, and that it is something you “figure out as you go along”(Participant 3).

“Motherhood to me is validation. That I’m good enough, that I can be and am a responsible, loving and morally good human. I feel like it’s a duty to pass on good values, manners and intentions to human that was made purely out of the love of two people. Motherhood is fucking exhausting. I haven’t had a full night’s sleep in weeks since my son decided to cut all of his molars at once. But despite having to rock a 14kg lump of boy at 3am, when he wakes up at 5am and tries to smash his boudoir biscuit into my eyeballs, motherhood offers patience and love too. It’s a gift and responsibility all at once” (Participant 7).

“Motherhood to me..... It’s EVERYTHING! Everything I ever dreamed about and longed for, wrapped up in two little packages that test my patience, teach me and challenge me daily. It’s more than I could ever have dreamed it would be and I am so very happy to FINALLY be here!” (Participant 2).

“I remember the day when the weight of it all came down on me – I was a MOM. For the rest of [child’s] life, I am [child’s] mommy. I am responsible for her, I have to take care of her. It’s a big deal – parents are among the most important people in someone’s life, and I’ve signed up for that. I am a mommy. I can kiss things better, make the best (or worst) dinners that [child] will compare all other meals to forever, and help forge her definition of love. It takes my breath away thinking about it, even now” (Participant 6).

“I feel like Motherhood is the calling I’ve always had, it’s something I always knew that I deeply desired to be. In my head it was all cuddles, sweet “I love you Mom’s” and little hands in mine when we did a million fun things together. And it is that, but it’s also lots of frustrated moments, emotional tantrums (from them and me) and struggling to figure out if I’m doing it ok or if I’m raising a bunch of chops” (Participant 5).

“I still feel completely ill prepared to be a mother and I think it is something that people should be required to write a test for or something” (Participant 3).

From the quotes above it is clear that one thing that motherhood is not, is simple. Motherhood provides as much to mothers as it does to the children they are raising – in fact I would venture to say that motherhood gives the mothers more.

The selection of quotes not only shows the struggles of motherhood – the late nights, lack of sleep, tests of patience and stamina, the overwhelming sense of being responsible for raising a decent human being – but that the underlying rewards of love, and learning more about yourself as a person somehow make the struggles, if not worth it, at the very least easier.

One of the more interesting quotes comes from Participant 3: she readily admits to feeling ill-prepared for motherhood, something that is interesting in that she is one of the two participants with children in their teens. Here we have someone who has been at this job of motherhood for longer than most of the participants, and instead of extolling the virtues of it all she is among the few to admit that there just is not a trick or ease to it all. And it is with this participant's thoughts that we are better able to see a push against the construction of perfect mothering – it is worth mentioning that a very similar line of thought came from Participant 12, the participant with the oldest and largest family.

This leads one to consider that there is something about how long one has been parenting that and the changes that it brings that affects the way in which motherhood is constructed and performed. In contrast to Participant 3 and 12, Participant 5, with three children in the schoolgoing and preschool stage, is most visible on her blog and other social media in displaying the 'perfect' motherhood we are thought to aspire too – one with well-dressed and clean children doing something fun with their equally well-dressed and happy parents. In 'perfect' parenting I am also referring to the 'intensive mothering' Hays (as cited in Douglas & Michaels, 2004:5) mentions. Although the notion of well-dressed, perfectly put together, model pretty, happy and fun parent is part of the constructed perfect mother, it is a smaller part of intensive mothering.

In her article Bell (2004) discusses the notion of intensive mothering by stating that the:

“... responsibility for mothering rests almost exclusively on one woman (the biological mother), for whom it constitutes the primary if not sole mission during the child's formative years. The corollary view of children is that they require constant care and attention from one caretaker (the biological mother) (Glenn as cited in Bell, 2004). This view is called 'the ideology of intensive mothering' by Sharon Hays (1996). It 'declares that mothering is exclusive, wholly child centred, emotionally involving, and time-consuming. The mother portrayed in this ideology is devoted to the care of others and self-sacrificing (Arendell as cited in Bell, 2004). It rests on the assumption that a woman will become pregnant, remain pregnant, and bear a healthy child. In other words, it assumes a seamless progression from conception to birth. An intensive mother is held and holds herself accountable for keeping her children fed and housed and 'for shaping the kinds of adults these children will become' (Hays as cited in Bell, 2004). Working class, poor, professional class, and affluent mothers believe child

rearing should be child-centred and emotionally involved, but they vary in their interpretations and practices (Hays as cited in Bell, 2004). Feminist scholars have shown that the persistence and growth in intensity of intensive mothering ideology serves the interests of men, ‘capitalism, the state, the middle class, and whites’” (Hays as cited in Bell, 2004).

With intensive mothering placing emphasis on the biological connection between mother and child it starts its long and sustained attack on motherhood and how it is performed from pregnancy or the lack thereof. It builds on the notion that one can only be a mother through biological means, something that is patently untrue. One is not made a mother through the act of pregnancy or birth, but through the act of parenting. And ideally this should be something that is understood by all, but it is not – one of the participants is an adoptive mother, and as such battles with the biological notion of mothering often; yet it is not something that only she balances, but it is also something that troubles those participants who had emergency C-section births, and those who had difficulties breastfeeding.

For those mothers being a mother and performing motherhood is not tied to a biological notion. It is then followed up by a punch of mommy guilt when the mother is not the primary caretaker of her child – there is no guarantee that her child will be given the child-centred and emotionally involved care from someone else that she would give, as she is ‘outsourcing’ her childrearing.

What is interesting to note in what Bell cites from Hays is that the notion of intensive mothering is shared across the various class lines – the minutiae of it may vary, but the commonality lies in a child-centred approach, with the mother being held and holding herself accountable for it all. It begs the question as to how these mothers across varying class lines all come to hold an idea of perfect motherhood/ intensive mothering. In large part, the answer can be found in the media, but it is not solely there. The media may put the idea out there, but it is something which becomes socially perpetuated, arguably perpetuated so often that it becomes a cultural and social fact. It certainly seemed to be fact for my participants. They made mention of the idea of a ‘perfect mother’.

“I feel like [social media] puts a lot of pressure on us (or me) when I see what other mom’s put out there, share online. Obviously I realize what we see is so filtered but still, I look at other peoples posts with their beautiful homes and well-dressed children and then I come home to my house, where my children & dogs have ripped the couch and scratched the coffee table and they’re running around with messy hair and mismatched clothes and I feel like I wish I could do better. But perhaps that has a lot to do with my own desire to strive for perfection” (Participant 2).

And it is precisely here that the distinction which the popular blogger has comes into play. The influencer nature of the popular blogger, along with the social and cultural capital she has and gains from her use

of social media, becomes part of perpetuating and strengthening certain thoughts and beliefs – an act that would occur across varying degrees of consciousness and unconsciousness. Here the blogger becomes part of the intensive mothering cycle – “everyone watches us, we watch ourselves and other mothers, and we watch ourselves watching ourselves” (Douglas & Michaels, 2004:6). Only the blogger occupies a very interesting space within this, because she is both of the media and not of it.

“What makes (some) digital media technologies ‘social’ is then that they enable everyday people to be participants in, and not simply spectators of, media (Mandiberg, 2012; Beer and Burrows, 2007 as cited in Marres, 2017:48): users can now create and publish their own contributions, often thematizing their own everyday experiences; by connecting with other users, and they can organise and create communities; and through sharing and commenting platforms enable the collective validation, promotion and evaluation of knowledge, events and actors” (Bruns *et al.*, 2013 as cited in Marres, 2017:48).

The blogger is both of the media and not of it, because as demonstrated in the quotation above, she is a participant in the media who is connecting with other users, creating a community and by her sharing and commenting on matters providing validation, promotion and evaluation of knowledge, clearly demonstrating being part of the media.

On the other hand, bloggers are treated with disdain within most circles of traditional media due to the perceptions of anyone being able to blog, that people are just blogging to receive ‘free’ goods, and perhaps more importantly, because there are no overarching codes of conduct for bloggers as there are for those in the more traditional forms of media. Thus, while the blogger might, in sharing her story, speak against the idea of a perfect mother, in doing so she still enables the notion of what a perfect mother is to be perpetuated.

In the extract below Participant 7 talks about the various things that create ‘mom guilt’. With every item that she lists, however she is creating a picture of what the ‘perfect’ or rather intensive mother would do.

“This mom guilt and depression thing sets in pretty quickly, ok. On the first day he arrived, I cried because my baby had to get fed formula. On the second day, I cried because [husband] had to sit in front of my nipples with 1ml syringe and catch the colostrum. I feel guilty when I put him to sleep in his nursery. I feel guilty for only making it 7 weeks of exclusive breast milk feeding. I feel guilty for only taking 4 months maternity, for selecting a creche over a nanny, using Woolies ready-made meals instead of cooking, for neglecting my animals and for saying ‘good luck’ instead of ‘good night’ to my husband” (Participant 7).

Thus, with every word she states she is not only creating a picture of the perfect mother, but she is also constantly watching us watch her, watching herself, measuring herself against an impossible standard

and feeling a failure for not meeting that standard. And while in sharing her story and feelings of guilt she is giving her readers the welcome knowledge that they are not alone in any of those feelings or actions, it could be used by some as a means to construct their form of parenting as better, or the right way to parent. It paints a very particular notion of motherhood as the only way to mother. And it brings to the fore that while we may know intellectually that there is no one right way to mother, it does not remove the emotional notion that there is.

It does very much become an emotional notion, as intellectually we know that meeting the bare basics of loving, clothing and feeding our children is what we should do. But this does not meet the emotional desire to be the best and go beyond the bare basics. Douglas and Michaels (2004:6) see this desire to be the best as part of the “ultimate female Olympics: We are all in powerful competition with each other, in constant danger of being trumped by the mom down the street, or in the magazine we’re reading. The competition isn’t just over who’s a good mother – it’s over who’s the best. We compete with each other; we compete with ourselves.” And it is in that cycle of competing with each other, and competing with ourselves that motherhood becomes work.

“I love the term ‘Work at Home Mom’ (WAHM). It’s much more accurate than working mom, or stay-at-home mom. I’m working, and mothering, from the home, and the onomatopoeia of the acronym works well too – it’s the sound of your energy hitting the floor by the end of the day. ... The reality is, working from home with a baby to take care of is ridiculously hard. There are the odd moments when [child] sleeps and I’m able to focus on the work I want and need to get done. But most of the time, she is wanting my attention just as much as my work is, and I end up feeling like a failure on both accounts” (Participant 6).

“Shewy, sometimes I feel like parenting is a job. The grudge parts of it – packing lunch boxes, washing all the freaking clothing all the freaking time. But the actual heart to heart, face to face parenting is fun” (Participant 5).

The extracts above both demonstrate that there is a scale to motherhood as work. Participant 5 says that sometimes it feels like work, especially those things we do daily. And with Participant 6’s extract we notice that when one perceives oneself as not doing it as best you can that you could feel like a failure: a feeling that plays on what new momism creates and feeds on. You can only be a good mother if you follow the demands of intensive mothering, and complete them with ease.

## **Parenting while blogging**

Many bloggers are open about using their blog as a means to look back and see a snapshot of their – and their family’s – life as it was at a point of time. And while some do see and comment on the other things

that blogging gives them, there is little space given to exploring just what impact blogging has on their parenting. This is not to say that it does not occur at all, but it does seem to be something that becomes more considered for those with older child/ren – older children in this instance are those of schoolgoing age, seven years and older. And those with older child/ren are also those who start to take more consideration of the impact blogging has on their child/ren. One of the participants had a post tackling this: she started with talking about how she started blogging just as her second child was born and that the space has helped her get through many things. But, she writes:

“... that the nature of my blog and the fact that so many lovely people have decided to read it, I get sent things with the hopes that they make it onto the blog or my social pages. So, the other day I came home with a package that had been sent to me by a fabulous brand that wanted to work on a small campaign. This happens fairly regularly (maybe once a month – that feels like a lot to me) and the kids know that most often, those packages are for them. Usually I tell them about it on our way home. Hype it up a little even. And then I just give it to them. Because it’s awesome and I like the fact that my hard work on the blog means I can spoil them a little. But this week has been a bit of a nightmare. ... I was done. So I didn’t give it to them. Instead I just put it on the kitchen counter and carried on with the rest of my day. Eventually they noticed ... and immediately wanted to open it. To which I replied, ‘Nope!’...They couldn’t believe it” (Participant 5).

She continues by telling how her children now had to earn the package; they had to amend their behaviour and run their own giveaway. It is interesting to note that how the blogger used an item gained through her social capital as a tool to aid in her parenting strategy. Yet, far more telling is how her children have become so accustomed to the benefits of their mother’s social capital that certain things were becoming considered their norm. Considering the manner in which the participant tackled this – by having them do their own giveaway on the blog – can be seen as a way in which to demonstrate the work involved with blogging. And that it does not always mean getting to experience new things.

“I think blogging has made motherhood possible for me. In today’s world, we don’t have the networks and communities our mothers and grandmothers had and who has the time ☹ the blogging community, you lot in particular have kept me from losing my mind and normalizing the whole experience. Like my child isn’t a complete crazy person and I haven’t broken her totally every step of the way, because I vomit all my fear into the page and then you reach out and say, hey, my kid is EXACTLY the same, try this. Ps. You are not the worst mother ever” (Participant 1).

“I always remind myself that anyone could be reading one day – from his future partner, to his teacher to his job recruiter. As much as I write for myself, I write for him. Does this make my personal blog a bit “dishonest” in that I don’t share a lot? Maybe. Does it make it a bit boring? Maybe. Do I care? No. protecting my little dude and myself come first” (Participant 4).

“[My child] wants to blog with me. Hence the rebranding. He even has his own Instagram account (which is set on private and I have it on my phone to monitor as well) he loves seeing photos of himself and often asks me to take photos of him etc.” (Participant 8)

“Most people will tell you not to read too much into every little thing, but it is so hard. Especially for new moms – how do you not try to take every single precaution? How do you separate facts from fiction? The bottom line is, as a parent, no matter what you decide to do – *seriously, hear me on this*: no matter what you decide to do – **someone somewhere is going to be convinced you’re doing it wrong**. Just keep doing the best you can, the best you know how. Love your baby and love yourself. By doing that you are already doing a great job” (Participant 13).

The extracts above illustrate the ways in which some of the participants work within the parameters of blogging and parenthood. For some, the work of both roles is balanced by including their child/ren in aspects of blogging. For all it is a means to share, to give other mothers the affirmation that they are doing the best they can at parenting. And in doing so they make it possible to take that affirmation in for themselves. It stresses that parenting while blogging gives the bloggers some of that which they looked for, or used as a reason for why they are blogging.



## 5. Conclusion

“No, digital media technologies do not offer a neutral ‘window’ on the social world. And the problem here is not a negative one: it is not simply that digital technologies give a ‘biased’ view of the social world. Such a problem definition upholds the representational point-of-view that is precisely problematized by the interactive features of digital technologies. To be clear, it is certainly possible to conduct digital social research in a representational framework, but work conducted within such a framework leaves out far too much of what is empirically important in the study of digital societies. It produces a blind spot for the very role of digital technologies in the enactment and transformation of sociality” (Marres, 2017:188 - 189).

What the quote above stresses, and what is shown throughout this work is that when looking at something that occurs online one needs to take into account the impact of the technology on that which we observe. The technology at play, the blog and other social media platforms, do not work or operate within a vacuum. The platform and content speak to each other, and create the picture we observe. Thus, one cannot speak about one and not the other.

And it is the very nature of the ways in which those interactions occur and where they occur which makes neutrality something that does not feature. The internet is not a neutral space, much as we would like to consider it one. The internet is something we access through certain tools, and in and of itself, that internet as a space is managed through the use of servers, which are located in certain spaces. Those spaces fall under the mandate of certain laws of whichever legal jurisdiction it is in. Those factors thus make it a far from neutral space, or neutral view.

So too is the content on that space. Each person who creates the content comes to that with their views and histories embodied in them, which they then embody onto their electronic form. There is no way to examine the interactions on the space without being aware of the technology and its function.

### **What does it mean?**

In coming to draw the conclusions from the previous chapters together here, it is helpful to recap what the core questions of the research were. The first question was, what type of space is the South African mommy blog? In a nutshell, a social space. In a little more detail, the blog is a social space that serves as



an electronic body for the blogger, the body whereby she interacts with the internet – and those using it as well.

The blog has the blogger falling under part of the subfield of the blogosphere, both spaces which operate as third places for social interaction amongst members of the community. And as such, the mommy blog serves as the site reinforcing that one is not alone in going through the experience of parenthood.

The second question asked how motherhood is constructed in that space. The answer to that lies in two parts. The first part draws back to why the participants started blogging – to not feel alone in the process of parenting. Blogging provides/provided them with a means to not only share their stories, but in sharing their parenting stories they could be heard, and show other mothers that they are not alone.

The second part of the answer lies in the ways in which by sharing what she is doing, the popular blogging mother shows both the idea of a particular kind of motherhood, which she is both perpetuating and pushing against. The pushback also serves as a perpetuating mode, because you cannot push against something without showing what you are pushing against. At play is the discourse of new momism – an intensive parenting process. Motherhood (and blogging) is a process of intensive work, a process the participant's child/ren are aware of. And as such it has an impact on both the perpetuating and push back of that particular idea of motherhood.

Following on from the second question was one that asked where authenticity features in the mommy blogging space. The question of authenticity is an important one when one considers that the popular blogger turns the social and cultural capital which she has/cultivates into the material form of capital. The process of building up the capital occurs over time – a scale which in and of itself speaks to the scales at play for the blogger in gaining the other forms of capital. One must consider the question of authenticity – and whose authenticity – as the blog is the embodied and institutionalised form of the blogger's cultural capital without which she would be unable to transform her symbolic capital into a material gain.

Furthermore it comes into the question as the blogger's social capital increases. Those initial relationships built over time question the way in which the blogger uses her blog (body) as a site to sell products. When her social and cultural capital, which are deeply entwined in her blog based on relationships built over time with her readers, are then used/leveraged for material gain, the change becomes troubling, and needs to be negotiated in ways that make sense to her.

The final question asked what the unwritten rules were that the blogger had to follow to be successful in that space. These come from the ways in which the blog form is constructed. The near uniformity of form – or shape – and its conventions show that while there are no hard and fast overt rules, some things are known and used. There is a uniformity that goes beyond those set into place by the platform being used.

Furthermore, the consideration of one's audience and what they expect creates the trends that bloggers need to follow to maintain audience interest, and these also play a role in locating the unwritten rules of the space. The form of the blog displays these rules of both the field, and the ones that make up her habitus, as embodied on the blog itself. It actively shows and keeps in mind the history of the body and informs the manner in which other aspects are considered and used – the blog as a body carries the habitus of the space, the form and the community that interacts around it.

### **Limitations of study**

A significant limitation to this study was found in its nature of being part of digital sociology. Given the ever-changing nature of the digital, it meant that a significant portion of the thesis was dedicated to locating the digital part of the work as it was during the time of performing the research.

The argument could be made that not being able to conduct the interviews and focus group in the more traditional face-to-face form was a limitation to the work. It serves as a limitation due to the loss of non-verbal – and as such not considered – cues for the interviewer to pick up on and push further. Additionally, it meant that interrogation of what was said and shared was limited to what the participants chose to share. Yes, what was not said or shared added dimensions to the interrogation and examination of what was shared, a thought that presupposes that all that is learned from the participant is to be considered the whole truth...without any room to quibble. While adding dimensions to the work, the use of digital methods to conduct the interviews and focus group came with their own set of limitations.

### **Possible further study**

Subjects for further study include various aspects of writing, communication, privacy and work. When one looks at the interaction between the blogger's audience and herself, it seems clear that the work cannot be read without taking in the intent of the one who wrote. After all, she can always address concerns or questions from the readers as they emerge within comments, as edits to the post in question or even in a new post interlay. The blogger also has the power to edit comments, change, delete or ignore them; it is, after all, her corner of the internet.

This brings us to the idea of blogging as power. And the question of whether that power is diminished or added to by the way in which other social media platforms are engaged with and tied to the blog. What tools of displaying authority and power does she gain from using one medium over the other: does the game of being an influencer mean you need to be everywhere, all the time? Does a social media influencer even need to have a blog? Is it enough if you are ‘famous’ on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook or YouTube? What other displays of power are available to a blogger, and how are they shown? How do those who blog work with the power of naming something? Is that an aspect of power that is only applicable to those who operate within the field in the space of success? And when bloggers mention that they blog as it is a form of therapy, why that notion, and how does it tie to the ideas of power in words and naming things?

Furthermore, do the observations of this study apply only to mommy bloggers? Where do those who blog about gaming, books, travel, beauty and food fit in? Are the expectations of brand loyalty a point of consideration for those who blog/influence in those spheres? Is it a given that they have received everything they talk about as a freebie, and therefore do not need to declare that the post is sponsored. There are also questions of community within those spaces. Is there a blogging community in the areas of gaming, beauty, food, travel and reading, or do those who operate within those spaces operate in isolation with no care for others who may be talking about their subjects? Is the relationship between the reader and blogger as key in those spaces as it is in the mommy blogging space?

And what about the reader/audience? Is a reader the same as an audience member? What role does that person play in it all? Can the interaction between the reader and blogger ever amount to more than the reader going from the audience to watch the performance of self from the blogger to that of the reader becoming the product that the blogger uses to gain forms of capital?

More tellingly, is there any room within the blogosphere for those who do not have the time or excess resources to devote to blogging to become popular? Can the distinction that comes from being popular – and the associated monetary rewards – ever go to someone who does not place a lot of work into it? And just how homogeneous is the space? From the participant pool, it would appear that only a particular form of motherhood, and expression is taken as the ‘right’ way to do those acts. Where exactly do fathers fall in this space?

An examination into the various aspects of privacy at play would make for an interesting study. How ethical is it to use images of others, such as the blogger’s child/ren when they are unable to fully consent

to it? Is a line to be drawn in terms of what can/should or should not be shared about others when speaking about your journey? The change in self is personal, it is not a lonely road: how do we balance sharing about ourselves with sharing about those who are in our lives?

And finally, there is the question of work. I briefly touched on aspects of the different forms of work associated with blogging, the blogging community and motherhood, but there is so much more to still be considered within those spaces. This includes, but is not limited to further exploration of, the work that influencers do, the role of technology in this gig economy, the nature of the gig economy, the work of care and the work of communication. In addition, there is the manner in which those forms of work are compensated for, whether or not they are, and the manner in which they are recognised or unrecognised, especially along with how some of the work done is gendered. And in further considering the work of blogging, and the examination of alienation to it, there is more to be done around the idea of alienation and blogging: for some the act of blogging is creative, and per Marx (Tucker, 1978: 75 -78) creativity is the species being. Thus a look at what happens when alienation from creativity occurs is needed.

Ultimately, all of the aforementioned questions to take further include the manner in which gender is at play. Would the experiences and answers found to questions differ if this was a study done on ‘daddy bloggers’?

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